To My Wife

Robina, I have here recorded
A life to equal my own span,
Hoping the race this woman ran
By you at least shall be applauded.

Printed in Great Britain at
The Fleet Street Press
East Harding Street, EC4

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

OUR postmaster, Barnaby Blanchard, it was—my eldest brother's son—who brought the wild notion to my notice.

"Lor, Nephew!" I said, "what a fantastic thought, my dear!"

Barnaby was a nice man and a bit of a scholar, like his grandfather before him. His mother, Grace Blanchard, lived still and continued to be a dear friend of mine. I'd held her hand when Barnaby was being born, for she would not let me out of her sight and Doctor Meadows bade me stop and support her. And her first man-child in fullness of time did well at his schooling and though, of course, ordained to follow his father, Aaron Blanchard, at Birch Hanger Farm, and inherit the land handed down through three generations of the race, yet, when the challenge came so to do, turned against any such prospect, for there was not a mite of farming in his nature. He inclined to black-coated work, so he went into the Postal Service and, when he was over forty, became appointed to be post-master of our village and felt satisfied to conduct that task. He ran it with a shop, naturally, because in a little place like Beesworthy there was never enough doing at the post-office for an ambitious man like Barnaby. He called his business a "general store," and didn't much like the people to speak of a "shop-of-all-sorts," but I never knew why it sounded distasteful on his ear.

Of course all our family patronized Barnaby, who was held to have done well and carried on the name of Blanchard with credit.

I'd gone in for a penny stamp and he gave me one of my favourite boiled sweets off the ration. Then we fell into talk about my past.

"I often wish, Aunt Pete," he said, "that you would turn to a task well within your powers and also beyond the powers of any but yourself to perform. With your energy and good education and cleverness at letter writing, why shouldn't you occupy an hour or two every day and set down the course of your long life? You've got every needful gift for the job and the most needful of all—a wondrous memory. We often marvel in the family what a storehouse of memories you are and how clear you can see the past long before our generation was born.

"Once you turn your mind to it," he went on, while I sucked my sweet and listened, "the past would unfold before you and all the

events would take their turn in proper order same as in one of those panoramas we used to see when we were children."

"I remember them well," I told him. "Most wonderful journeys you could take in those moving pictures. That was fifty or sixty years and more before what we call 'moving pictures' now were invented. You'd start off in a ship and go on your voyage and see the wonders of ocean and foreign lands and strange people and go round the world, all in a couple of hours. But panoramas are things of the past now, Barnaby. Boys and girls to-day wouldn't have the patience to sit and see 'em."

"A very fine panorama you could make out of your own life notwithstanding," he assured me. "It's in your power to bring back all manner of unremembered events and bygone people who will be forgot for ever if you don't set them down. A chance to say kind things of the dead."

"Well I never!" I said. "What a parlous task you'd set upon me, Barnaby. But I don't know of so much worth telling as you fancy. There's a lot better forgot than remembered in every long life. If I launched out on such an adventure as that, I'd be most like to take the bright side and dwell on the happy spots, because my memory, good though it may be, would never linger much with the bad ones."

"You're built that way no doubt," he admitted, "and always lean to the hopeful side. Life, as I see it, runs in a pattern and the design is woven in the fabric, and for such as you, the high-lights would stand out clearer than the dark."

"By the will of God that's so, Barnaby," I agreed, "and a very orderly thing; but when you say I might set down all my eighty years and more, you have got to consider the nature of such a tale. Who would gain? There's one or two I grant might treasure what was there—yourself among 'em and also my foster-daughter. She, of all others, would set store upon it. But there wouldn't be anything of interest to anybody else, because my life has jogged along, much like the lives of a thousand old women, with the happiness remembered and the sorrow not forgot."

"There's dark items in the pattern no doubt," he said. "You can't be an octogenarian and not run into a bit of woe now and again; but often our sad experiences may attract other people a good deal more than our joyful ones. Catastrophes are news. And most certainly you can't pretend that your life has been commonplace. There's nothing commonplace about you. There was your escape from death before you married to begin with."

Then, seeing me hesitate, he ran on and showed he had thought

about such a thing before speaking, which was his custom, being a cautious man.

"I believe you might well find it an easier bit of work than you think for," he said. "As I see it, Aunt Pete, you can look upon the task as divided into three natural partitions."

"How so?" I asked and he made it clear and showed himself to be in the right.

"First," he said, "there is my Uncle Thomas Appleby and his day and all that happened in it; then you'd find yourself up against dear Uncle Micah, and lastly, there must rise up Uncle John and you'll be called to deal with him."

"Fairly," I bargained. "If such a thing was to happen, I should deal fairly by your Uncle John."

"You will deal fairly by all that comes to your memory no doubt," he agreed.

"I've never spoke my full mind touching John because under no compulsion to do so," I told him. "And people respect my silence on that subject. But busy ones, thinking to please me, had a lot to say about him—very hard things. You need to consider his actions without bias."

Barnaby Blanchard lifted his eyebrows and pursed his mouth.

"Very large-minded I'm sure," he answered. "Just what one might expect from you, and no doubt, if you set to work, you'll throw light on a good few other people badly in need of white-washing. That's your humanity; but you mustn't overdo it."

"There's more grey than black or yet white," I told him. "I'd go so far as to say I've never met man or woman in my life who was all saint or sinner. Just good and bad mixed in different proportions, and you admire 'em, or hate 'em according to your own standards of good or bad, which incline you for or against 'em. But your own standards are just as like to be mistaken as any other body's standards."

"Very large-minded, Aunt Pete," he said again, and then customers came into his store and I took my stamp and sailed off.

CHAPTER II

NEPHEW BARNABY'S suggestion, that I should set down chapter and verse of my long story made no very deep appeal to me for a time; but, thinking it over, I remembered there was one dear creature who would welcome such an effort with a full heart and cherish it vigorously enough. I would sooner please her than any

later, I bought the materials: a packet of ruled paper, some pen-nibs which I favour, sharp and hard, and a bottle of grass-green ink, which is restful to the eyes. Off my nephew himself I bought the lot and, of course, he knew what I was after and wished me luck and wouldn't take a penny for the goods.

"If ill befalls me 'tis your doing," I said, "and you will be accountable for it; but if my good angel holds the pen, then all may yet be well."

"You never had a bad angel overshadowing you," he answered; and, ere long I got down to work and found the task calling for a dictionary from the start, because, if you commit yourself to writing, the written word demands you spell it properly. Speech glides off the tongue easy as running water and gone so soon as said, but once you set it on paper, there it stands to shout your ignorance if put down wrong. And much else beside confronts you when you gaze, pen in hand, at a virgin sheet of paper. There's living people as well as the bygone ones who may clamour to be told about and, in that case, you need to watch your penmanship very close. However I saw no perils there, for if you can't say anything good, what easier than to say nothing at all? In telling of the dead also you need to bear in mind that departed men and women cannot answer back and seldom leave behind anybody who would think it worth while to try, so in their case, if you don't know the whole truth, it's better manners to leave them alone.

CHAPTER III

My father, Moses Blanchard, farmed Birch Hanger of old, and six children he had by Susan Blanchard, his wife, who was a Westaway. Mother, having borne four babes—two boys and two girls—rested awhile, then hit on something to give variety to her family and had twins in the shape of me, Petronella, and my brother, Herbert. There was a good gap between us and our elders and we got very friendly together and made our own games and should have been lifelong friends no doubt but for the sad fact that Bert's thread got cut untimely when he was fifteen.

Father used to say that you must serve boys and maids, if they are good, same as you serve good dogs and cats. You pat the dogs and you stroke the cats and, being greatly inclined to Bert and myself and prone to overvalue us, he patted Bert and stroked me whether we were good or naughty. A kind father and he praised me very

hearty when I took over our poultry at fifteen years old and said I had the making of a clever hen-wife; and he patted Bert into the Royal Navy when he joined a training-ship at Devonport and saw no reason why he shouldn't be a sailor. Then, after my twin brother lost his life by an accident in a ship's boat, and was drowned along with three other boys, father took it very hard and I wept bitter tears and my light went out for a month of Sundays, because I felt to have lost the better half of my own self. Father understood my grief very well and he bought me a nice lot of Buff Orpington poultry to distract my mind from poor Bert. Which, in course of time, they succeeded in doing. Our 'Buffs' were famous round about presently and took prizes in open competition. But mother, though proud of Bert and me, and bitterly sorry to lose him, was always more addicted to my eldest sister, Primrose, and at the time when my little brother passed out, Primrose was tokened to Nicholas Ashbury of Liverpool, and the date of their wedding already fixed. So mother, concentrating on that, wasn't so much overwhelmed by Bert's death as father and me.

Our family now consisted of our parents, Aaron, my eldest brother, James the next, Primrose, Phyllis and myself. About then I first began to find Thomas Appleby in my thoughts. Birch Hanger stood inland from Beesworthy, but our fields ran to the low cliff edge only half a mile north of the village and our orchard came up to the churchyard walls on the east. As children Bert and I oft went down a little goyle that gave on the beach and our friends were the longshore fishermen who made their living round about. We'd run errands for 'em and help to pull in the boats and they would be kind to us and sometimes let us go out with them when they went to pull up their pots. And among them was Thomas Appleby, a busy, hard-working young man, very keen on his business and very clever at it. He followed his father and worked for him afloat, while old Mr. Matthew Appleby did the vending ashore, having a good name for nothing but the best. He was a great friend of my father and I came acquaint with his son and felt rather proud of it, him being twenty at the time and a big noise among the other fellows. Tom favoured me and would let me go out with him to the pots and even take me fishing under sail now and again when the mackerel were plentiful. And that was a great feather in my cap, because he never let any other girl do such a thing. But he had a weak spot for me from the first and long after, when we fell in love, he confessed to me that he had liked my passion for going out fishing and my handiness to learn what he taught me and my quickness to get seaworthy and be useful in a boat. "Even then, before your hair went up and your petticoats came down to your boots," he said, "I'd got a feeling you might be the girl for

ne." But my suspicions that he might be the man for me didn't dawn till a bit later. That he was presently going to fall in love with me never occurred to me till long after. My father knew old Mr. Appleby very well and they'd drink tea together sometimes of a Sunday; and then—on one of these occasions, after Primrose's marriage—the old fisherman brought Tom to tea with him and I had the pleasure of showing the young man how clever I was by now with our poultry and the beautiful Buff Orpingtons father had given me. He was very interested in the farm, however, and he and my eldest brother, Aaron, who would succeed at Birch Hanger, soon left us and went to look at stock and so on. But from that time forward Tom generally turned up too when his father came, and he didn't arrive to see my brother, but to get in a word with me. 'Twas then, after I stood in sight of my seventeenth birthday, that mother found how the land lay and called my attention to it.

"Pete," she said, that being the name I always went by, "what price Tom Appleby?"

My mother was a woman who never chattered and father often used to say about her that she showed what a darned lot of conversation was needless and only waste of wind-power, though ever a great talker himself.

"I didn't know there was a price put upon Tom Appleby, Mother," I said, "but I've found he's very addicted to me and I like him very well indeed. He's always clean in his person and he's mighty strong and never swears."

"I've no quarrel with him," she answered. "He's trustable and he's got his father's religious opinions and Matthew's money behind him in the future. But red hair often goes with a short temper. He's high spirited and so are you; but love must be a game of give and take if it's going to be enjoyed by both the players."

I thought upon this, because I had the fierceness of youth in my nature in those days, like most other young things if they are healthy, but it hadn't landed me in any trouble to name so far, and never with Tom Appleby.

"We have not had a quarrel yet," I told mother, "and his red hair's the making of him in my opinion. I can't picture him just commonplace, with brown hair, or mousey hair, same as most men."

"He's ambitious," my mother warned me, "and ambitious men seldom have much time to spare on their partners."

"I shouldn't be feared of his ambitions, for I know 'em and there's none that would be likely to get him into trouble," I said.

My mother agreed.

"I grant you that. He comes of very fine stock and his father

carried on the good work his mother began. Matthew was never ambitious but always a great thinker."

"I like old Mr. Appleby very much," I told her. "And he's got a very favourable view of me, owing to me being my father's daughter, because father is his best friend."

My mother nodded.

"That's so," she said. "You being the apple of dad's eye, he'll hate for you to leave home, but since you wouldn't be going out of Beesworthy and always at his beck, he'll get tempered to the thought before it happens."

Up to now I'd kept Tom on tenterhooks, because he'd offered for me—on a day when I went out with him to catch dabs—and he'd anchored his boat two mile or more from shore and set down his lines and we were waiting for the dabs to get feeding. And while we waited, he passed the time by unfolding his feelings and saying how I was getting on his nerves above a bit and he'd thank me to say how he struck me as a husband and whether I thought he was good enough to take for keeps in a year's time, or thereabout.

"You may say, Pete, that we've been keeping company in a manner of speaking for a good bit now," he began, "and, when I first let you in my boat, nobody could have felt more surprised at such a weakness than myself; but that was the thin edge of the wedge no doubt, and from that time onwards, you took my fancy more and more. Now I love you tremendous and believe you'd be no hindrance to my future but quite the contrary, because you've got brains and pluck and love the sea and wouldn't be feared of taking a sailor."

"I've caught a dab," I said. "Wait a minute, Tom."

That gave me time and, after I'd drawn up the fish and took him off his hook and baited again and let the line sink to the bottom, I answered him. Meanwhile he waited quite quiet for me to speak.

"Of course I care a lot for you," I began. "You've been uncommon nice to me and I was very proud when you let me go out in your boat—a thing you never granted to more than two boys before, let alone a girl. And I agree with you that I should be no hindrance to your future, but far from it, because I've always been well known to have my wits about me, and my father would tell you the same. I like your manners and customs, Tom, and, now I know you properly love me, I shall look at you with other eyes and find what it does to me to hear you want me so much."

That was the way I talked when I was seventeen.

"All right," he said. "I'll give you six weeks to make up your mind and I hope it will be favourable."

"It won't take so long as that," I answered, because his voice had

gone rather flat when he heard I wanted time. In sober truth I thought the world of him and loved him quite as much as he loved me, but at seventeen you've got your airs and graces still and like to feel fancy free.

We left it so and talked about the price of dabs in the market and I praised his father's salesmanship and so on, and when we'd put in two hours and caught some nice heavy flat fish and an outstanding plaice among them he drew up the anchor, hoisted his sail and came in. I'd learned to steer by now and he said I did it in a very understanding manner.

"It's a lucky thing," I said, "that both father and mother like a fresh dab and can always count upon one when I've been out with you."

But that didn't interest him.

"To return to you for half a minute," he said after we'd landed and he was stringing the best of our catch for me to take home—"To return to you, Pete, my father spoke a clever thing but two nights since. He thinks very high of you and he said it's more than a thousand pities a girl with such a quick brain as what you have, don't give a little time to educate yourself higher than you have reached yet. He's a great one for education as you know, and in his opinion, if you could make time for some lessons in various subjects, it would be a tower of strength to your future. You're more than clever enough for me as you stand, but he feels that knowledge adds to sense and makes for happiness. 'There's nothing so interesting as knowledge,' he told me, 'and if Petronella's got an inquiring mind, she'll be a wise girl to go to the night school at Kingsbridge.' 'It's an idea,' I told father, 'and very like, if she can make the time, she'll fall in with it, being so clever as she is already.' "

"I've thought of it myself," I said. "I'd like to be much cleverer than I am, Tom."

My parents supported this idea, and, with the summer and daylight evenings, I went three nights a week to a school they'd got in our market-town, but a few miles from Beesworthy. And that's how I came by my scholarship, such as it is, and learned to handle a pen and get a smattering of information to make me usefuller. And, looking ahead, I took some pains to grow better acquaint with the ways of figures, for, though bright as a button in other directions, Tom was a very poor hand with them. Meanwhile, I'd made up my mind that I loved him quite well enough to marry him, and, in the upshot, I didn't keep the patient man waiting above a fortnight. It was during that time I had a talk with my parents and found both well disposed to the match. But father bargained for a year to pass

before it happened and bade Tom seek a home worthy of me and convenient for his work. There were some nice brick cottages building at Beesworthy just then, not a mile from Birch Hanger and but a quarter of a mile from the Strand, so, when we were tokened, I mentioned the matter.

"Father's very wishful for us to start life in a good manner of house," I told Tom, "and reckons it would be a clever thing if you put yourself down for one of the new six-roomed houses that Fred Masterman's building; because there you'd be near your work and I wouldn't be too far off from the farm."

"Then I'll see Masterman and get on with it and watch over the building when I'm ashore," he promised.

He was very happy that evening and took a most smiling view of his future along with me.

"You know me for a masterful man," he said, "and I know you for a strong-minded piece. We have got wills of our own—both of us—and none the worse for that."

"We have got a grand will towards each other, which is the great thing," I told him, "and it's no odds if we differ in small things if we never differ about each other."

So he kissed me yet again and, after supper, came up to Birch Hanger and had a talk with father and mother. And they received him as my intended and didn't see any reason why we shouldn't make a good job of it. After that I pushed on with my lessons, and it was known we were keeping company and Tom brought me a tokening ring when he was next in Dartmouth, and it had a proper precious stone in it and cost him two pounds and five shillings.

So we fell in step, saw as much of each other as possible and looked forward to the future. There were breezes, of course, as we got to know each other better; but in truth they amounted to little, because in great things we always saw alike and, where we didn't, the upshot was so trifling that we often laughed at ourselves afterwards for being pig-headed about nothing at all.

Then, with the roof on our house and all going well, the first proper adventure of my life came down upon me like a thunderclap and taught me a mighty lot more than I'd got at my schooling, and learned Tom much more than he'd gleaned as a longshore fisherman. In fact things happened that went so far as to aim, not only at our hopes for the future, but our lives in the present and, though it sounds impossible that such a coil could have overtook the pair of us, yet so it did and we faced no less than death. While, as if that weren't fearful enough in its naked self, a horror more dread yet looked out from behind it and threw a light upon our characters that made us

both properly ashamed. In fact, you might say neither Tom nor I was ever quite the same again. Up till then we were on very good terms indeed with our characters. He prided himself on his skill in his business and understanding of the sea and his great strength and high principles, while I, finding how much and how quick I was learning, and how I could cope with the rules of arithmetic and so on, began to think I was a girl a bit out of the common and doubtless give myself a lot of airs in consequence. All the time our pride was riding for a fall and, when the crash came, it took a terrible ugly shape and knocked the stuffing out of us to a pitiful extent.

Lots of happiness we had before the blow fell, for I properly loved the sea in those days and liked nothing better than to be on it with Tom at all hours and in all weathers.

"I wish I'd been a boy, then I'd have gone for a sailor long ago, like my little brother, Bert," I told him once; and he granted I'd got the sea in my blood and might have made a good seaman.

"But, thank God, you wasn't a boy all the same," he said, "for you've got the promise of being a very useful girl."

I'd poke fun at him sometimes, because caution was his second name, but when I told him he was feared of the sea, though he lived by it, he answered that he was feared of naught on sea or land, but he knew the sea and I didn't, and I'd soon learn to fear it all right if I knew it as well as he did."

"It's a case of ignorance is bliss with you, Pete," he said. "You think the sea's a good-tempered old monster and wouldn't hurt a fly; but that's because you've always got me along with you when you're on it."

He wondered in secret at my cocksureness and how I couldn't feel any sense of danger, and once he took me out in a capful of wind and thought to see me show a white feather when his boat shipped a tidy wave; but the only white feather was on the sea itself and I laughed and said I wasn't feared of a pail of water and helped him to bale, so he didn't get any change out of me that time.

The whole holiday I'd fixed my mind on wasn't a public one, but autumn fair day at Kingsbridge, and father was showing our famous white bull, 'Turk II,' and counting to get first prize with it. But I didn't care about that and Tom had promised to pleasure me and take me fishing. I was working very hard now and, what with my poultry and my lessons, I felt a whole day for pleasure would be a great treat. I built up my hopes a lot looking forward to it, and so did Tom; but he wasn't so keen for the fishing as I was, that being his daily bread and no holiday. He'd have better liked to stop ashore

and go to the fair; and the evening before, he came up to smoke a pipe with father and asked me to change my mind.

"Give the sea a miss to-morrow, Pete," he said, "and come to the fair, and I'll pay for a good fairing and you'll see your dad's famous bull take first prize."

"That's what I want her to do," said my father. "'Tis an interesting thing, Tom, that only my head man, Jonas, and Pete herself can handle 'Turk II.' He'll come like a lamb to her and she's known him since he was calved; but I wouldn't trust another save Jonas, or her, with him for an instant. A tricky mind the creature's got and I often wish I could read it."

"I lay he's all right if you don't show fear of him," said Tom. "Creature's soon know if they've met their masters."

I laughed at him.

"That's what I tell you about the sea," I said. "The sea's all right if you're not 'feared of it; and I'm going fishing to-morrow, Tom, and nowhere else. I've set my heart and been counting the days. And I've planned a proper dinner, all packed, and one of those pasties mother makes that you love. It's going to be a beautiful holiday."

"Have your way," said my sweetheart, "and when I quit the sea some day and own big boats and employ lesser men to sail in them, what will you do then?"

"Make love to them and get 'em to let me go trawling in mid-channel sometimes," I answered. "It's life to me to be on deep water and I'd dearly love to sail clean out of sight of everything but the sea itself some day."

CHAPTER IV

I WAS on the beach fine and early next morning after I tended my fowls, and I carried a brave basket of food and a bottle of beer for Tom and a bottle of lemonade for myself. The weather looked hopeful enough to me because, though the reds had been in the sky at dawn, which is a bad sign, there wasn't a lot of wind blowing and that off-shore, so the sea ran smooth enough. But I found Tom in no holiday humour. He was clever about weather and said the wind looked to be backing against the sun and the glass had fallen in the night. We got the boat down for launching and another man, going out to his pots off Surf Rocks, helped us. He didn't like the weather neither.

"Wind's going back," he said, "and freshening."

"What of it, Dave?" I asked, the man being David Gollop, a longshore fisher of no account, though his family had stood high in the parish once.

"There's going to be a bit of a blow presently," he said.

"Let it blow, then," I said. "I wonder some of you men are brave enough to go out to your lobster pots sometimes."

Tom thanked Gollop for lending us a hand and then pushed off and ran up his sail

"I'll try for a late mackerel or two, then be back before sea gets up," he said, but that wasn't my idea at all. We slipped away and I made ready a couple of lines and cheered him up with my own high spirits. The sun had risen, though not as if he was going to enjoy the day. A bit sulky he looked as the clouds gained upon him. The wind was shifting, but Tom lighted his pipe and I took the helm and we carried on for best part of an hour. Then, finding the mackerel weren't there and nothing doing, I said we'd go out to the dab grounds, farther to sea, and cast anchor and get a bit of our own back. He argued against, so we ran out a short half-mile and anchored, but not on the proper place for dabs in my opinion. However he was firm and said he had no mind to go farther to sea and wasn't going to do it.

"We'll fish for half an hour or thereabout," he said, "then I'm going in. Sorry, Pete, but the sea's rising ashore and we'll have our holiday when we get back."

I felt a cloud over us by now and much disappointment that my hopes of a long spell afloat looked like being cut short; but then things brightened a bit, for though the sea was beginning to run and white horses flickering on the waves, fishing turned to a proper wonder and the dabs couldn't come in quick enough. Even Tom forgot for a bit and the sport was so good that he said we must take our bearings and remember where we'd anchored.

"Shows how you learn something every day," he said.

I was very excited to pull in real big fish in this way and didn't notice the weather. The wind was beginning to offer rain from the south by now and the sky darker, so Tom warned me we must up lines and run home. But we didn't lie more than three parts of a mile off shore and I felt quite all right, though there was a good bit of a lop on the boat by now. Then a wave lipped over and he said we must be off and sharp about it.

"Cruel sorry, Pete," he said, "but it's going to blow darned hard in half an hour and there's a tidy sea running on the beach already."

Yet, in my wilful foolery, I wouldn't hear of it.

"'Tis the day of my life, Tom," I cried, "and I won't miss a minute and I ain't going to stop for a puff of wind, nor yet a bucket of rain. Look at that fish!"

I'd fetched up a two-pound dab as I spoke—a most wonderful specimen.

Then Tom grew short and our terrible flare-up started.

"It may be the day of your life," he said, "but you don't want for it to be the last, do you? It's going to take twenty minutes in this boat to make shore and we ought to have gone an hour ago."

"Just five minutes more if you're frightened," I said. "And I never thought you was a coward."

This angered him as well it might, but he'd been caught napping a bit himself by the wondrous fishing and, though he lost his temper, he well knew it was no time to lose it. His proper seaman's instincts woke in him and he acted.

"Draw up," he said. "There's a sea running on the beach and the sooner we're over it the better for my boat."

And I got angry, and all the angrier no doubt because he kept so calm. I said sharp things and sulked, like the fool I was, and then, going forward to get the anchor, he pushed me out of his way and I fell and sat down on a mass of dabs and was too astounded to speak another word, but just squatted and stared at him with my hair blowing over my face and all my handiness gone out of me. The wind was freshening by leaps and bounds and sea-horses whitening the wave-tops, so Tom, finding the anchor wouldn't come easy, whipped out his knife and cut the rope. Then he hoisted our little jib, but didn't put up a rag of the lug-sail and went to the tiller and ran for it. But never a word he said to me and I kept my mouth shut too and got up off the dabs and wound in the lines.

The boat, *Morning Star* she was called, seemed a parlous long time getting her way on and I wondered why the waves was passing under us instead of carrying us along with them, but presently she got going with the wind harder every minute and the sea running high enough to poop us if one came over. Then I could see the waves on the beach and felt our danger for the first time. I knew what he meant now and saw men running about on the Strand and shouting because they knew what we had let ourselves in for. A big surf rolled between us and the beach and what had looked but a harmless thread of white water from our anchorage was a very different sight now as we came wallowing near to it. We'd took in a lot of water already and I started to bail and heave some of the fish out of her. But never a word Tom spoke. His teeth were set and he stuck to the tiller with his eyes ahead.

I made pretence to be fearless and talked a lot different from what I felt.

"My!" I shouted to make myself heard in the noise. "It looks as if we were going to get wet before we get ashore, Tom!"

And I smiled to show my temper was sped. He cast one look at me, but didn't smile back and I never saw his face so grim before.

"It looks as if we was going to get drowned afore we get ashore," he answered, his eyes on the sea, "and serve you damned well right if we are."

I'd never heard him swear before and I didn't make no answer, and the next thing was we heaved up on a huge wave as though it was going to carry us with it into the broken water; but it passed ahead and we hadn't got there yet. It lifted us like a cork and rolled on. I feared he'd need to tack and reckoned it couldn't be done if we wasn't to get broadside on to the sea and be wrecked. It was only a matter of minutes now and I felt the might of the ocean and the weakness of man for the first time in my life. I watched the seas and wondered which was going to topple aboard and sink us and thought how different a flurry on the water looked from shore to what it does when you hap to be in it. But, strange and shameful to tell, even the mess we were in didn't bulk so large in my fool's mind as the insult my intended had put upon me and I hated him good and hearty and ordained I'd throw him over presently, if I lived to do so. He altered course a trifle with no hurt and it looked healthier I thought and safety a bit nearer; but then our jib got more wind than it could hold and was blown clean away. The ropes parted and there was a crack like a pistol-shot and the sail went up in the air and flew ashore far over the Strand like a great bird, and I wished we could have gone with it. But life was out of the *Morning Star* and she lost way and just lumbered at the will of the waves and drifted with the surf that waited to sink her. The din was such that we couldn't have heard ourselves speak if we had wanted to, but Tom knew we were for it now and he dropped the helm and took off his jacket and his sea-boots and stood up holding to the mast and signalled me to go forward. The boat was water-logged and bailing vain, but, though a wreck, she floated into the white water and held together till we reached within a hundred yards or less of the shore and could see men with ropes making ready to do something about it when we got near enough if ever we did. Then came the finish and a roller twisted us round like a straw though we floated yet and didn't touch bottom for a little longer. All I remember after that was Tom making a grab at me with the intention to save me, though his last words had been that I deserved to drown; but a cross wave knocked

him over and, when I came up to the surface again, I'd lost sight of him and was trying to swim till I could touch bottom and get saved by the men ashore. I saw them close now and ropes flying, and one man coming towards me up to his breast in the surf and then a wave washed me heels over head and I remembered no more till I came to my senses on the beach. It was David Gollop who had come out with a rope tied to him and got to me and grabbed me and lifted my head above the water. Then he and I were dragged ashore like a sack of potatoes; meanwhile Tom was saved likewise and made a better landing than what I had. The *Morning Star* had come in bottom up by now and, when he saw I wasn't drowned, he set to work with a lot to help him save what he might. His boat had stove in, but they dragged her up after a bit. I mind coming to and laughing at an old man who was watching over me. He said all was well and a lad had run for Doctor Meadows and hoped to find him at home; but I didn't want a doctor. I was sick and rid myself of a lot of sea-water and then I stood up and told the old chap there were enough dabs on the beach to feed all Beesworthy. I didn't go till I'd got two dabs from the beach and thanked Dave Gollop for saving me, and then I bolted home.

"Looking back," I said to father when he returned from the farm, "you might go so far as to say I was to blame more than him, but nothing could excuse a man for saying his lover deserved to drown and I haven't forgiven him by a long shot, if ever I shall."

Father was on my side, of course, and hadn't a good word for Tom just then.

"He ought to have set his foot down and refused to go," he said. "He should have been stern as a rock not to run you in danger, it's hard to forgive him for that. Meantime you're saved alive, which is all that matters to me and your mother."

Oceans of rain fell as the day passed noon, a proper cloud of darkness settled on the sea and a rare fierce blow brought in autumn; but our white bull got first prize before Kingsbridge Fair was drowned out and father praised God for all his blessings when he went to bed that night. We expected Tom would show up next day, but he didn't, though we heard from a fisherman, who called after breakfast, that the *Morning Star* was done for and good for fire-wood and no more. But the man—David Gollop it was—didn't know a thing about my sweetheart so I resolved to go down and ask after him and tell him I'd resolved already for him to have all my private savings towards a new boat.

The reason why Gollop had been in such a hurry to come to Birch Hanger was me. He reckoned that he had saved my life at danger

to his own and counted my father would haste to reward him richly while the affair was still hot in his mind. David was well known for a man who set hard cash above salvation—an unfortunate weakness in his case, because hard cash was always bound to be terrible short for anybody with such poor earning powers. The Gollop race had been big people in Beesworthy long ago. In the churchyard there was a row of them going back before Queen Victoria's days, and Birch Hanger itself had once belonged to the head of the family, who sold it to my own grandfather long years ago. And that was the last Gollop to have money and dominion over land. There were only four Gollops left now in Beesworthy: David and his two sisters and their Aunt, Miss Mercy Gollop—a parlous, maiden woman of whom her nephew and her nieces went in fear. But all three clove to her very faithful and obeyed her orders, because she was the promised land to them, having money and a house and garden of her own. So, as she was mighty old, they counted to inherit the lot, which would be the only hope for any of them when they grew old themselves.

David's sisters were Mildred and Ethelinda, but folk always called the younger just "Linda," that being quite enough of a name for a little go-by-the-ground woman like her. She was a gentle, kindly creature and a great friend of mine—my first woman friend in those days. She and Milly were laundry women and neither ever married, not being the sort to offer any great attractions to the male mind, or eye. David was also unwed, though Linda told me that he ordained to find a wife some day after his aunt died and he became the head of the family. They all pinned their hopes on the future and when Linda looked ahead and dreamed of the blessed day she wouldn't have to wash anybody's clothes but her own, she'd begin every speech with "When our dear Aunt Mercy's gone home."

Her brother began to grow grey though not much above thirty years old as yet. He was a grizzled man with his chin the foremost thing about his face and a miser's mouth and grey, stupid eyes. He hadn't much brain—so folk said—but always ready to accept drinks at the "Fisherman's Arms," though shy of standing other men. Linda thought he would be difficult to live with, being a grubby chap in his habits and indifferent to cleanliness. However, he'd had a tidy good sea bath for once when he fetched me out of the surf, and now he stood before father and told his tale and how he'd plunged into the breakers and dragged me ashore by a miracle of pluck and valour.

"There's not many I'd have done it for," said Dave in his slow, gruff voice, "but seeing who it was and knowing what Pete is to you, Farmer, I took the risk."

"And very grateful we all are, Dave," said father. "There's little doubt neither of them would have made shore alive if there had not been you brave fellows waiting and ready to rescue them, and I shall always remember it in your favour, Dave."

He put his hand in his pocket then and pulled out his purse.

"And so shall I always remember it, Dave," I said, "and wish you luck for your valiant deed."

But Gollop had his eye on father's purse by now with the look of a dog waiting for his bone.

"I was in my blacks at the time, being a holiday," so he reminded father. "Little I cared for that when the challenge came; but my trousers are ruined, and my bowler hat haven't been seen since—and new at that."

Those were the days when men of means held gold in their pockets as a matter of course and paper money only appeared in the form of Bank of England notes; so father took two gold sovereigns out of his purse and handed them to the fisherman. To me it seemed a pretty handsome reward for Dave's efforts, and father, I think, was of the same opinion, because, in those far-off times, money ran where it only crawls now; but the visitor showed bitter disappointment. Always hopeful, he had clearly counted on a fortune, while father, well knowing that if Dave hadn't got to me somebody else would, thought two pounds met the case.

Gollop stared, then scowled and he thrust out his chin as if somebody had done him an injury.

"God's truth!" he said. "Don't you set no more store on your maid than that? And you a rich man and offer me two measly quid for saving her life!"

But father wasn't daunted.

"You did what any other decent chap would have done," he said, "but if you feel it a matter of service to be paid for, give me back my two pounds and send in your account. Then I can ask Lawyer Townley about it, Dave."

But poor Gollop wasn't going to give up his two pounds. He put them in his pocket and turned to me as he went off.

"That's all your father's love is worth, my girl," he said, "and I'll let it be known."

Then he went off and father laughed.

"A drop of the old family blood," he told me. "They were a greedy, quarrelsome race and often in trouble with their neighbours. I'll do him a good turn some day. You can always pick up chances to serve people if that way inclined."

"I don't feel to be worth two pounds to anybody—not after

yesterday, Father," I answered. "Least of all to Tom. I'll go down and see how I stand along with him."

"Talk to his father," he advised me. "You can always trust Matt to hold the balance between contending parties. But I hope there won't be any contention. You and the boy were both wrong and only need to own up and be done with it."

With that I went to work and, after dinner, ran down to the Applebys in a contrite spirit and very wishful to let the past bury the past. But I found the past wasn't going to be buried so soon as I'd hoped. Mr. Matthew Appleby called me in, but Tom was out and I heard from the old man that my sweetheart took a very dark view of the doings. His father welcomed me gladly enough however. He was a wise man and noted for it, and he had taken to me from the first and I had taken to him. He worked hard still and his hobby was book-reading, to which he devoted his leisure time. He wasn't so big as Tom but built on the same sturdy lines and he had a thoughtful face with little, old-fashioned whiskers and pale blue, quick eyes. He was a nobler object than Tom, because so many years had passed over his head and his mind was stored with old wisdom and his forehead wrinkled with it. He had been a red man like Tom in his prime, but now his hair had turned white as foam and he wore it long and it gave him a look that reminded you of religion for some queer reason. He was full of religion for that matter and very curious as to the life beyond, but he had a sense of fun, which wasn't handed on to Tom.

"Thank the Powers you came out of that misfortune safe, Pete," he said and kissed me. "A most comfortless affair and the boat gone."

"I've come to say I'm sorry, Mr. Appleby," I told him. "'Twas very wilful of me and I hope he's forgiven me by now."

"Not yet," he said. "Tom's a slow thinker. He hasn't forgiven himself yet for being such a fool as to listen to you, Pete; but once he's forgiven himself, then he'll forgive you no doubt."

"Is he all right?" I asked.

"He's quite well and he's gone to Dartmouth to-day about a new boat."

"He'll have all my savings towards it," I said, "and father will help also, Mr. Appleby."

He laughed his little laugh.

"No, no. Don't you offer anything like that. He'd be a lot too proud to take it. And give him a miss for the present. Let time pass, Time's the only ointment against some wounds."

"All right," I promised. "I'll wait; but tell him when he comes

home I'm properly sorry and I hope he'll call his new boat after me. And tell him I'm thankful to God he wasn't drowned, Mr. Appleby, and I hope he's thankful I wasn't."

"You must take it serious, Pete," he told me. "You turn too much to laughter sometimes, my dear. This is the first serious reverse Tom has ever known in his life, and your first serious reverse bulks big when you're young. He's shook up, but he'll soon shake down again. I'll tell him you're contrite."

I didn't much like this however. I was sorry enough, but I was young, too, and I remembered sitting on the dabs, and the things Tom had said to me, and felt there were two sides to it. And to be told I was contrite hurt me for some silly reason, though true enough, of course.

"I'm learning and schooling so hard as I can," I said, "and getting knowledge to be a valuable right hand to the man, and I can't do more for the minute. And if he ordains not to forgive me, it won't be the end of the world, Mr. Appleby. And I'll give him back my token ring instanter."

He laughed in his tender way again.

"You go back to your books and your birds, my love," he said. "I quite understand. And tell your father I was mighty glad 'Turk' got first prize at Kingsbridge yesterday."

So back I went with a lot to think upon and, as the days went by and Tom didn't show up, my thoughts began to trouble me. But there was worse to come and a fearfuller danger yet to face, though it fell on Tom alone, not me, next time.

CHAPTER V

I FIGURED it out and calmed down. It looked in the nature of things that we should fall out now and again, as the best of lovers will, if only for the pleasure of making it up afterwards. My mother threw light.

"You were both mighty silly, each in your own way," she said, "but Providence overwatched you and saved your lives after you'd risked 'em in a very childish manner—so childish in fact that I don't feel too sure if either of you is old enough to go into marriage at all."

But I thought and waited, and among my thoughts a good bit of wonder what Tom himself might be thinking and if time was healing him as quick as I could wish. I hoped he would have come to my conclusions and everybody's conclusions, that I'd been headstrong

and he'd been weak. I looked at it from his point of view, which is always a fair thing to do when you fall out with a neighbour, and a vital thing to do if you fall out with your lover. Then, as time passed and he didn't show up, I ran to extremes and took a dark view and couldn't let down my food with my usual appetite. 'Of course,' I thought, 'if he harbours malice against me, then that's the end of it and I'm well shut of him. Providence might have known we weren't suited and took steps to part us accordingly.' But then I'd find myself loving him as much as ever and hating the blank he'd left and yearning for his red hair and his arm round me again. Once or twice there came an impatient urge over me to take the first move and face him and hear the worst; but then a cold chill would fall upon me, that such a thing might ruin all, because I knew Tom was not the sort to let anybody else take the lead where his affairs were concerned.

I could look down and see him on the beach every day, busy lending a hand here and there and waiting, no doubt, for his new boat. For the storm had made a lot of work and trouble for others beside him. Yes, I could see him lending a hand, but though only a little way distant in his body, I had no idea how far away he might be in his mind. So I went up and down between hope and fear, and father comforted me.

"Love's love," he said, "and since you properly loved each other, then you'll come together again in good time. You called the tune on that hateful day, Pete, and you must let him call the next tune when he wills to do so."

"In reason, Father," I answered him, for I'd got a feeling now that Tom looked at it this way. I crept into his mind, or thought I had, and reckoned that he was feeling now I had put him to shame. That was a dark thought, because to be put to shame is the most awful thing that can overget a proud man and he might hate me now a deal fiercer than ever he'd loved me before.

"And who can fairly blame him?" I asked myself.

Then I began to fear that my errors were a good size larger than his, and I never sang so small in my own ears as I did when I remembered how I'd called him a coward. Next I got sick of looking at it from his point of view, because the more I did so, the quicker hope died in me. I had my pride likewise; and there came another twenty-four hours when my pride worked up again and kicked against the pricks. And then I just hung on to love and let that conquer me, and hoped that his love would conquer him the same way.

Presently there came a ray of light because Tom's father dropped in, as he was wont of an evening, to chat and smoke his pipe with my father. Dad sent me packing when he arrived, but

after Mr. Appleby was gone again, I heard, through my mother, something of how things looked to be.

"Matt put it very clear," said my mother to me, "and there's no call why you shouldn't hear about it. Your young man has considered his feelings and weighed you in the balance very deliberate and also listened to his father on the subject. He's been mistrusting you good and hard, but he's got to see now how it was your ignorance and his weakness allowed you both to play the fool. Some days he still reckons you were most to blame, but on his sensible days, he's fairer. He said a very proper thing to his father and I bore it in mind. He said 'If I'd had the sense of a smelt, I'd never have let her go. Then we'd have had a proper rumpus no doubt and very likely parted for a bit till we'd both cooled down; because then, when she saw that big weather blow up, her wits would have proved to her that I was right and she was wrong. After which, with her sense, she'd have given me best.' That's what Tom said, according to his father's report; and that's how it would have been no doubt, Pete."

On the whole I took this kindly, because it sounded true in my opinion.

"Would you say he was loving me still, Mother?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "At bottom he's loving you and feeling to miss you out of his life no doubt, same as you miss him. He's forgiven you be sure, but he's raw yet, so you'd best to let more time pass. His new boat will comfort him."

So I held on and kept away and hoped every morn he'd come before the day was done; and then a queer thing indeed overtook us, for we were drawing together and each longing for the other one until the longing moved us on the self-same day and the self-same hour! There came an evening when I set out to go and see him and hear him once more, because I felt I couldn't bear life without him another hour. I never was one to stand up to suspense very comfortable and I told myself I must know whether he was lost, or at any rate on the way back; and by an odd miracle, as we found out long afterwards, Tom had reached to exactly the same pitch! So, preparing to go down the hill, through a field called "Bull's Lease," where "Turk II" lived, if I didn't come face to face with Tom tramping up to have it out, for he wanted to be done with it and in smooth water on an even keel again.

"There my life!" I cried, as he came up the lane just when I was opening the gate to go down through "Bull's Lease" and save a quarter of a mile. "Oh, Tom, I was afoot this instant moment to you because I couldn't stand no more of this horrid emptiness!"

"And I was coming up to you, Pete," he answered.

Rather a shame-faced pair we were and not very quick with our tongues for the minute; and such are the cruel, senseless ways of youth that, even then, neither of us said the word in season to bridge the gap and come in each other's arms again. But pitiful pride still cumbered our silly souls and, save for the fearful thing to follow, we might have parted for evermore five minutes after we'd come together again!

He didn't kiss me nor yet cuddle me; he was cold and the chill had got in his voice.

"I hope you have took no ill from that day's ugly work," he said.

"No," I replied. "None whatever, and I'm glad you didn't. But you took grave ill from the loss of the *Morning Star*, however you might decide about me and whatever I might decide about you, Tom. And I ordain to give all my savings—twenty-five pounds—towards the price of the new one. And that will make us quits for me calling you a coward which was a very wicked, wrongful word to use."

I meant well, but didn't please him in the least.

"As to that, I don't want your money," he said, "and can pay for my new boat very well. You know whether I'm a coward or not and, if you still go in doubt, there's plenty can tell you. And when you talk about us deciding about each other, what are you trying to say exactly?"

"I said exactly what I meant," I told him. "How was I to know you hadn't thrown me over, keeping away from me as if I was the plague, and how were you to know I might not have changed my mind for that matter?"

"If you're going to take it like that, Pete——" he began, then changed his mind and went on. "You was coming to me—so you say. Why? To tell me you'd changed your mind? Because if so——"

"I told you why I was coming," I answered, and felt the blood coursing through my veins and my heart going too quick. "I was coming because I couldn't stop away; but I don't feel so sorry for my sins as I did when I started, and I don't see no call to grovel in any case."

"Offering your silly money and well knowing I'd be the last on earth to take it," he went on.

"Best you go if that's the spirit brought you up the hill," I flamed out. "I don't want to look a fool in my own eyes no more, though I do in yours. And whether 'twas bravery or cowardice, to push me head over tail on to a pile of dabs when I was trying to help you, you know so well as I do. And, for the rest, I'm sorry I named you a

coward and I'm sorrier still I ever set eyes on you. And now you can go!"

That was the way I talked to Tom, and him on the brink of his grave at the moment if I'd but known it!

We glared at each other like a pair of cat-a-mountains for he was as angry as I was, but kept his mouth shut. Then he turned his back on me and got over the gate where we had been standing and made to go across the field, which was a short cut down to Beesworthy. But I knew Turk was out grazing and though the gloaming had come down by now, I could see the bull lying on the grass. So I spoke again.

"Turk's down there, Tom Appleby," I said, "so best get out before he sees you."

He was glad of an excuse by now to let off his temper.

"Bulls!" he said in a passion. "Who's afraid of bulls but you farm people? Be damned to the bull! Danger is on the sea, not the land, and you shan't have no more chances to call me a coward, Petronella Blanchard!"

"For God's love—not mine—get out of it," I said. "'Tis what I know about the bull, not what you think about him. Come back. He hates men and he's in a beastly temper for the minute. Oh, Tom, please!"

But he was stubborn in his turn and ploughed down over the field, too angry to care two pins for the bull. And if "Turk" had been a tiger he'd have done the same. No doubt he thought, if it came to action, he could trust his feet to carry him into safety.

I shouted to him again and then climbed the gate and went after him.

"Don't be a fool; don't be what I was," I cried out. "I've given you best about the sea, give me best about the bull if you've got a mite of sense left!"

He was fifty yards into the field now and another hundred to go before he got across. He'd seen the bull, for he couldn't miss the great white bulk of him. "Turk" was lying down chewing his cud and taking the evening air pretty quiet; but he'd heard me shouting and now he turned and saw Tom and hove up quick on to his legs. I screamed out to him.

"Bully! Bully! Bully! Come here boy; come to Pete;" I shouted; but he'd got his back to me now and had marked a stranger man. He snorted, tore at the ground with his fore feet, and then Tom suddenly found a ton of angry beef on his track and the nearmost hedge best part of fifty yards to reach. For the gate at the bottom of the field was far beyond his powers to

get to. He took to his heels good and fast, poor chap, and knew well enough by now that if he saved his skin, it would be a fool's skin he did save. So there was I running and screaming at the bull, to distract him if I could, and "Turk" getting into his stride and Tom tracking for the hedge very quick indeed but not quick enough, because a dewy meadow isn't the place to show your speed at any time, nor a pair of sea-boots the best things to run in. He'd got a good start, but even a middle-aged bull can go a lot faster than a man and the creature was gaining pretty quick. I reckoned he'd catch Tom at the hedge before he had time to climb it and squash him against it like an egg-shell and my heart was in my mouth by now. He heard me yelling and then he heard the bull pounding behind and did a witty thing, for he took off his jacket and threw it down, hoping that it might delay the pursuer for a moment or two. But "Turk" didn't stop till he and Tom closed in upon the hedge together. It was a fairly tall earth bank topped with hazel and elm trees, so, unless lightning out of heaven struck the bull, Tom looked to be doomed. Then all was over in five seconds, though they stretched into eternity for me. "Turk" got to him well inside the hedge by the will of God, for if he'd been sooner, he'd have caught him in the open, then trampled on him and turned him into rags and bones; while a yard later, he'd have had Tom against the hedge and smashed him there; but what did happen was that the bull put down his head sideways and tossed Tom with all the might of his huge carcass behind the drive. And that pitched my longshore fisherman the way he was going. He crashed on top of the hedge as if he'd been shot from a gun, just missed getting brained against an elm and dropped on the other side. Then I came up and I smacked the bull on his face and cussed him for a godless rascal and left him puzzled to death in his little bull's mind to know what he'd done except to save me from an enemy. Next I got up the hedge and jumped down t'other side to look after my lover.

He was lying panting on his back when I came to him and stared at me in a dazed fashion as if he didn't know who I might happen to be, or why I'd come. I fetched out my handkerchief to mop some blood he'd got streaming down his face and then I asked him to feel himself over and see if anything was broken, and he obeyed like a lamb and tried out his arms and legs but spoke naught. When he came to his left leg he said there was something parlous wrong with that, but he was all right everywhere else, and I told him how the bull had tossed him through the hedge.

"He pitched you over," I said, "but if you don't feel any pain

Those were the days long before they took X-ray photographs of ur inside, or anything like that, and nobody ever heard of his pendix and such-like gadgets until years later. Millions of people d quiet and orderly of fatal ills not yet discovered, just as millions people lived without such fine things as vitamins and tomato ice and other cauteries to lengthen life. But what the wits n't know, the heart don't grieve about, and the doctors were usted and thought just as well upon then as now.

What rejoiced me was that Tom had got to stop in bed for a day r two, and, when he argued to rise up and don his clothes again and o home, Doctor Meadows forbade and ordered that he mustn't put oot to ground till his frame was trustable. Then he went off and his oy brought up a draught to be taken last thing, and a pot of ointment o be rubbed on sore spots and a bandage for his foot. Then Mr. Appleby laid out the whole come-along of it, much to the credit f Providence and how our bull was ordained by Higher Powers to nake safe a marriage planned in heaven and threatened to come to naught by the pair most concerned.

"We were going to thank God for all his mercies and keep our nouths shut, Mr. Appleby," I confessed, "but 'tis too big a thing o hide under a bushel no doubt."

"Everybody knows you were a fool on the sea, Pete," he said, 'and Tom was a fool on the land, so now each can mark the foolery f the other."

"I was a fool on sea and land both, Mr. Appleby," I pointed out.

"Light has come to you both," explained the old man, "and now ,ou have learned each other better than ever you did before, so it's up to the pair of you never to get in such a fix again. When the danger signal's hoisted, use all your wits to keep out of danger."

We promised most faithful to watch over ourselves.

"Once bit, twice shy, dear Mr. Appleby," I said, and then he struck a lighter note and distracted our minds.

"I was very much amused about Dave Gollop's grievances and must tell you, Moses," he said to father. "I went into the 'Fisherman's Arms' to talk to George Forrester and have a drink of spirits a few nights since, and there was David in the public bar airing his troubles. Like a lot of people, he confused something that was outside money value, with something else which was not. He counted on fifty pounds for pulling you out of the water, Pete, and built up a picture of his reward in cash, being that sort of man. He couldn't see a human life was an item above price and not to be calculated in money."

"Who saved you, Tom?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered. "There was a dozen good c in the water and so soon as my feet touched bottom I was safe."

"Father's going to do Dave a good turn when the chance con I said.

"And find it he surely will," foretold Mr. Appleby.

Then he went home in a very kindly humour and I waited the medicine came and gave Tom his draught, and mother tied bandage.

CHAPTER VI

In three days my sweetheart stood on his feet again and hunge for the sea, though very lame and called to travel on two sticks one more day after that. But no evil symptoms appeared : Dr. Meadows pronounced him cured and said he might go ho Which he did do on the evening of the fourth day. He was v wishful to see "Turk II" and went so far as the fatal gate, an brought Bully along by the ear and Tom gazed upon him and gc tidy good notion now of what he'd escaped from. I drove him ho in our market cart, and a week later there was the great excitem of his new boat coming round from Dartmouth, with me and him meet her on the Strand. A lovely boat and he'd nursed a surpı for me, because her name was already painted upon her and h called her *Petronella*. We were loving each other again to the utm possible degree by now and he said once, that few lovers were e likely to rise to such a ferment of devotion as we did, because few h ever been through such adventures.

"It was a sign-post that showed us the right road and we taken it," I said, and he agreed.

"You just say the word 'Turk' to me when I'm showing my cla in time to come," he replied, "and I'll darn soon draw them in again

Not that he ever showed any claws to anybody, for he was l father's son and a most reasonable man and developed a wondro patience with everything that happened to us in after years.

I had speech with Linda Gollop about then and she threw a litt light on David's flare-up.

"You see, Pete," she said, "he's a man that lives on hope—que thing in his case because there's but one way how hope can ever tu into reality for him or me, or Milly. But hope bursts out like flame in Dave and when he saved you he saw the promised lan He's long wanted a new craft, because the *Merry Milkmaid*—that

Dave's boat—is got to a state when the bottom might fall out of her any day, and, him being no swimmer, if she foundered in deep water, that would be the finish of Dave. He's said in plain speech that only the Hand of God lies between him and a watery death. But it leapt to his mind that his danger had been taken into account and now, by saving you, he was going to get the needful for a trustworthy raft; so he's feeling he did his part and Providence did its part, but Mr. Blanchard went back on the pair of 'em and didn't do his part."

"I see, Linda—I quite see," I said, and then gave her a bit of Mr. Appleby's wisdom and explained to her that human life is priceless. She was a nice woman and sweet-tempered too, but not very bright, and I couldn't make her understand.

"If your father wouldn't run to big money, you'd have thought your sweetheart might," suggested Linda. "You was worth more even than his boat to him surely."

You couldn't well argue with her on such a question and I changed the subject.

"You've always got your Aunt Mercy to lean upon," I reminded Linda. "She can't live for ever, wonderful though she is, and you'll come into your reward after she goes—all of you."

"Yes," she admitted. "Dave says Aunt Mercy's our lighthouse on a stormy sea and his hope mounts some days and sinks a bit on others. He puts his faith in the fact that she drinks a lot too much spirits and it's going to tell on her any time now. It's her eighty-fourth birthday next May, so we have got plenty of time to collect our gifts. She will have them, and this year Dave forgot her birthday present and caught it in consequence."

"You and Milly are her right and left hand, I'm sure," I said, "and she's very well-to-do by all accounts and no friends to name now, because they must all be dead."

"She never had any to our knowledge," declared Linda. "Only the man who gave her that fearful violin and taught her to play it; but he's been gone these years and years. In my opinion 'tis a race between Aunt Mercy going and Dave's boat sinking."

"Why doesn't he ask her for a new boat?" I suggested and Linda laughed. She didn't often laugh, there being little to laugh at in laundry work to a mind like hers; but the thought of her aunt giving her brother money to buy a boat amused her in a feeble sort of way.

"Lord love you, Pete," she said, "if Dave was to go to the bottom to-morrow, she wouldn't turn a hair! She don't care a brass button for any of us really."

"And all you do for her!" I exclaimed.

"'Tis bread cast upon the waters," she answered, "but with a woman like her—deep as a well and hard as a stone—me and Milly can't feel but doubtful."

Old Miss Gollop was an outstanding feature of Beesworthy in those days and carried on the traditions of the Gollop race—all gone now but her—because David and his sisters, though the last remains of the family, had none of the fearsome qualities of their breed. She lived alone at a house on the cliff called "Sunshine Lodge" and, for her companions, she had a tom-cat, called "Arthur" and a tame raven, known as "Satan." Though so elderly she was spry still and had her fiddle for comfort and smoked a pipe and went her own way in everything. She was thought to be a secret drinker, though there didn't seem to be much secrecy about it, because George Forrester, at the "Fisherman's Arms," confessed that for bottled liquor she could be called his best customer, year in, year out. Rum was her weakness. She was a brown woman with a big, wrinkled face, hard mouth, white hair and small, sharp, black eyes that never called for glasses and saw everything they wanted to and nothing they didn't want to. She was kind to the animal kingdom but cruel to humans and hated children. A bitter voice, and Linda said that when she got a cold, you couldn't tell whether it was she or her raven croaking. She hadn't got any friends save Lawyer Simon Townley, who looked after her affairs. Indeed Dave Gollop, who trusted nobody, least of all a lawyer, thought it a bad sign that Mr. Townley was so thick with her. Nobody in their senses could cultivate Mercy Gollop for pleasure, so her nephew argued, and therefore he feared sometimes that the lawyer was most likely doing so to feather his own nest. Against which his sister Mildred, who had more sense and was harder than Linda, said the lawyer wasn't born to best her Aunt Mercy, and that if Mr. Townley tried to do so, she'd soon send him packing. I'd always given old Miss Gollop "good day" for years if I chanced to meet her, but she'd only return an off-hand nod, because Birch Hanger had belonged to her people in the far past and she'd worked there as a girl and couldn't forget it. But I won her at last, because I took in a rabbit for her famous raven once and it was a great success and I often brought her one now and she'd accept 'em and let me look at her beautiful "Satan." And once she played her fiddle to me. Her face was always fierce and I never saw a kind look upon it except when she was scraping away at her fiddle. There were scores of stories about her, some true and some untrue; but no doubt in her prime she had been a right down Gollop, though grown too old now to make any trouble for her neighbours. I went to see her and took her a rabbit the week after I was reconciled with Tom, because I felt

rather proud in a way of being on terms with her. Nobody else ever called, except Dave and his sisters; but they went as slaves because they had to, while I dropped in now and again as a free girl beyond her power to order about. When our new vicar, Mr. Tozer, came, he called and hoped to find another friend; but she didn't even dust a chair for him. She looked him up and down and told him he was a lot too young to be a minister and that, for her part, she had no religion, but got on very well without it and hoped he wouldn't call again. He tried once more, being young certainly but sporting and a rider to hounds and brave enough. The second time he came she was in her garden and saw him pass through her wicket-gate and ordered him off the premises. So he went and didn't return.

She was sitting smoking her pipe and reading an old newspaper when I called, and she thanked me for a fine rabbit and went so far as to say she had been glad to learn I wasn't drowned.

"Simon Townley tells me the fault was yours," she said, "but a man will always put the fault on a woman if he can, ever since Adam ratted on Eve."

I related the sequel and how Tom had been very near killed by our bull, but lived to make it up with me.

She didn't often laugh, but, if you wanted to make her, the way was to tell her about somebody's misfortunes. That always got a grin out of her.

"I'd like to have seen young Appleby hove over the hedge by a raging bull," she said. "Funny sight for you that. There's not much to make you smile at my age; but that was one laugh I've got out of you, and t'other was to hear my god-forgotten nephew whimpering because your father only gave him two quid for getting wet dragging you to shore when you was wrecked. 'Hell,' I said to David, 'what do you think any human creature's worth, you zany? If I'd been down to the beach, I'd have done so much myself and made no song about it.'"

We talked a bit but it was one of her moody days and she soon told me to go, yet said one friendly thing before I went.

"If you don't have any more rows with the man but drag him to the altar and marry him, I'll give you a wedding gift, Pete," she said. "You can remind me if ever you fix the day."

"I will," I promised. "We'll never fall out again, Miss Gollop."

She looked at me out of her little black eyes.

"Men are all the same pattern at bottom," she declared, "and if you know the things your father does and says, then you'll find your husband does and says much the same and your son, if you get one,

will grow up likewise. They're not so devious as what we are and easier to read."

"I expect that's true," I said.

"Yes, it's true. They are much poorer liars than us, for example. I always know when a man is lying, but not always when a woman may be. Men lie as readily as we do, but not so well. We know a lot more about them than they do themselves, and they don't know a living thing about us really."

"Wonderful," I said, "that, being unmarried like you are, you know them so well, Miss Gollop."

"You don't need to be married to know 'em," she answered. "I was thrown a lot among men in my youth, when I did man's work at Birch Hanger, and I'd got a stronger brain than most of 'em and a stronger body too. I've shamed 'em before now by doing single-handed what they reckoned wanted four hands."

I always found her interesting, and her lawyer, Mr. Simon Townley, also found her interesting, as I learned in future time; but most people merely found her beastly and children fled from her.

Christmas came again and the time rushed on very quick. I would have died before I ever invited myself to go out on the water with him again; but, when he invited me, I felt thankful, for it seemed to bring us together once for all. His father had a poor winter in health and was called to keep the house through January month after a sharp attack of bronchitis, so Tom had a lot of selling fish ashore as well as catching them in the sea. I lent a hand when I could and saw a good bit of my future father-in-law and helped to pass the time for him and keep his accounts. For my education was brightening up a lot now and I still worked at my lessons. Geography and birds were the subjects I best liked, and old Mr. Appleby was very much pleased at my better understanding about the map of the world outside England.

"When you come to challenge yourself," he said to me once, "it's amazing to discover how little you know concerning the plan of the earth at large, let alone your own country."

"Geography enlarges your mind, Mr. Appleby," I answered, "and shows Beesworthy isn't the centre of the universe really, though, being Tom's home, it is the centre of the universe to me."

"From Devon your mind should travel over the whole island," he explained, "and then off and away to Europe and America and Australia."

He loved a book and, being able to read aloud pretty well by now, I'd read to him sometimes when I could spare an hour and rest his

eyes. He felt to be growing old and the discovery rather surprised him.

"Age is a queer thing, Pete," he said to me on a day after I'd been reading something about it. "It comes by fits and starts. You'll wake up one morning feeling so old as the hills and wondering how you're going to put your clothes on; and next morning you'll find yourself years younger."

"So father tells me," I answered.

"An upstanding man and made of sense," he declared. Then he went on.

"The most wonderful thing about old age is to discover it teaches you, if nothing else, how much you can do without, Pete. The older you grow, the less you need and the less you expect, and the less you get, and the less you feel disappointed when you don't get it. When you're young you want the moon and a lot more besides, but once over the seventy mark, your main interest is your food and a comfortable bed. Your bed grows up to be among the few friends left."

"That's how you talk on your bad days, Mr. Appleby," I said, "not on your spry ones. You'll never be a bed-lier, and live to go on reading in your books till you are a hundred most likely."

He could be most amusing too on some subjects. He was addicted to dogs for one thing. Generations of dogs he had kept, over-lapping each other, and told me he hadn't been without one for fifty years.

His eye always brightened if talk went doggy.

"Ah!" he said once, when a man was talking about his leavings after he was gone. "Dogs now—dogs want no place in our wills. They're quite content to have a corner in our hearts. Not so with cats, however."

He'd talk like that on his good days and when he got well again and went his rounds once more, we heard no more about him growing old.

Among his best friends stood Lawyer Townley, who would often drop in and sometimes fetch a book with him. They were the best educated men in the parish and suited each other well; and at my wedding, when the great day came, Matthew Appleby and Simon Townley attended the ceremony and father gave me away. Micah Widecombe, the shoesmith, stood best man for Tom, and I had Phyllis and our dairymaid, a great friend of mine, for bridesmaids. The choir sang and the church bells rang at my wedding with Tom, and a most successful wedding breakfast at Birch Hanger followed after, just as we had when Primrose was married. Her little sons were the pages in bright costumes, all silvery, like dolls off a Christmas tree, and the new vicar didn't use a Homily but addressed us out of his

head, which Tom thought was a bit saucy, because we weren't wanting any advice from a sporting parson not above thirty-three years old and unmarried at that. We had the covered wagonette from the "Fisherman's Arms" to drive us up to Kingsbridge, and finally we got to Plymouth and spent our honeymoon to great advantage there. We were often down on the Barbican among the fishermen and went out with them now and again, and we also took trips in a little pleasure steamer, and once we went up the river among the big craft as far as Saltash and saw the wondrous bridge there. Another time we sailed to sea round the Eddystone lighthouse, and Tom always said after how a big, three-master in full sail on her way down Channel was the grandest sight, after myself, that had ever filled his eyes.

Mercy Gollop wouldn't come to our wedding, but she remembered her promise and last time I went to see her before the great day, she gave me a flame new Bank Note for five pounds!

"I don't know what the mischief you want or don't want, so you can buy what you fancy down to Plymouth," she said, "and spend it on yourself, not him."

I did as she ordered and bought some pretty crockery for our parlour, and old Mercy, who was very fond of crockery herself, came into my house long afterwards and saw it. She looked at it in her piercing way.

"It takes all sorts to make a world no doubt," she said and no more.

I've wondered ever since what she meant, but nobody ever threw any light on it.

CHAPTER VII

Tom and I settled into married life very steadfastly and folk agreed we were to the manner born and promising to make a happy pair. So we did, and, looking back over our twenty-eight years together, I can't mark a joy or a sorrow not shared fair and square between us. Twenty-eight years is a long time and much must happen over such a period calling for attention whether good or bad; but in our case, the good wasn't very greatly to the front and the bad nothing we couldn't face together. Tom's hopes didn't come in sight as we had expected, and mine failed likewise; but he had my sympathy and he shared mine sharply enough because they hit him too and there was no blame attaching, but only the work of Nature which ran against me.

The first thing to be called outstanding, after we were settled in

ur home, overtook the Gollop family, and made a good deal of talk t the time. It came on gradually and ended in an explosion that hrew a lot of light on various mysteries, as explosions are apt to do. t began when, walking down the path to Beesworthy on a June fternoon, I met Milly and Linda Gollop sitting upon a wayside :at together and dressed in their Sunday clothes—a most unusual ght for a week-day. So I stopped and sat down with them and isked why they were pleasuring in their best garments on a Friday. They told me how they had asked permission for an afternoon out rom the laundry and it had been granted to them.

"Well you may stare, Pete," said Linda, "but it's this way. To-day is Aunt Mercy Gollop's birthday and she's very jealous about t and we are always called to mark the day and make a fuss upon it. We're on the way this minute and only waiting for David to turn up."

"I see," I said. "Glad I met you. I'll take her some eggs o-night. How old is Miss Gollop to-day?"

"We hoped in our hearts that her last birthday was going to be he very last," answered Milly, "but here she is again—eighty-four, and no immediate sign of a finish."

She knew she could trust me, else she wouldn't have talked like that.

"Acid as a lemon and hard as a flint still," went on Milly. "The only funny thing about her is her name—a woman that never knew the meaning of the word."

Linda sighed and nodded her head.

"There's some people can't manage to be Christians, try as they may," she said.

"Flouts this world and everybody in it," added Milly, "yet so confident of the happy land as the best people."

"Just takes heaven as a matter of course, when she finds herself in a mood to go there," agreed Linda.

"For five-and-twenty years we've ministered to her, Pete," Milly told me. "For all that time you may say she has been our cross."

"Our cross all right, and did ought to become our crown before so very long," sighed Linda.

"There's a lot more crosses than crowns going about," I said, "so father always tells me; but I hope you're right, Linda. You and Milly and Dave are all the relations she's got in the world and no friends but 'Satan' and 'Arthur,' and she can't leave her money and her house and grounds to her raven and her cat."

"David's cocksure we must get the lot," explained Milly. "We've been staunch and faithful, year in year out, and endured a cruel lot at that. And what other friends has she got? For my part

I'd say her filthy fiddle was more of a friend than even her animals. If ever I hated anything on earth it's that fiddle. Lord knows how often we have had to sit and watch her drawing hideous noises out of the thing."

Then she turned to another unfavourable side of her aunt.

"And so cruel contemptuous, Pete. Scorns us to our faces because we're laundry-women and earn our living by washing the people's clothes!"

"And despises David, too, because he's only a longshore fisherman," said Linda.

"Well, there must be laundry-women and there must be longshore fishermen," I said.

"She holds it for a come-down in the Gollop family," went on Linda. "They have took their place in the parish for a hundred years and farmed land and been somebody in the old days."

"And ain't you respected? Who but your aunt ever spoke a word in your dishonour?" I asked.

"We may be so poor as church mice, if not poorer," murmured Linda, "but that's no crime, just a misfortune."

"Does she give you presents on your birthdays?" I asked.

"Not a chance!" answered Milly. "The only present she was ever known to give, was the five pound note you had off her on your marriage, Pete."

Then their brother came up the hill. He was in his Sunday blacks, too, and carrying a brown paper parcel under his arm.

"He's remembered," said Milly as Dave arrived.

"Well, girls," he began, "another year knocked off the old bird's life."

After that he turned to me.

"Do you ordain to come to the party?" he inquired, "and if so, where's your birthday present? You'll get hell if you're empty-handed, Pete."

I told him I wasn't going to the party.

"But I'll take her some of my nice brown Barnevelder eggs this evening," I promised.

He sat down and mopped his brow for the day was hot. Then they talked about their presents and showed them.

"Milly's taking her a pound tin of that fearful black Virginia tobacco she favours, and I've bought a bottle of her Jamaica rum from Mr. Forrester," explained Linda.

"My! You're doing her well, both of you," said Dave.

"What have you got?" asked Milly, and her brother undid his parcel and showed us the biggest lobster ever I saw in my life.

"My stars! What a proper whacker, Dave!" I cried.

"A darn sight too fine for her, but she shall have it, and that ought to be a good mark for me," he said.

Milly mentioned a painful affair in the past.

"I hope it won't serve her like that crab you gave us served me and Linda," she reminded him and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't harp on that crab no more; I was sorry at the time and now I'm sick of it," he replied.

"So were we," replied Linda. "You might have lost us Dave, but for Doctor Meadows."

"I paid doctor's bill, didn't I?" he asked.

"Least you could do," replied Linda and David looked at his watch.

"Come on," he said, "and let's get it over. Three o'clock was her hour. So like as not she'll feed this grand lobster to her animals and say it was too tough for her false teeth."

They considered their aunt's pets then as his sisters rose up to start.

"Dave hates 'Satan' worse than he hates Aunt Mercy, don't you, Dave?" asked Milly and he admitted it.

"Yes, I'd say I do," he answered. "That carrion fowl's more than a bird: he's got an evil spirit in him. He looks at you and measures you up out of his shoe-button eyes and croaks to himself."

"I feel the same to 'Arthur,'" added Milly. "That cat carries a lot up his sleeve, or so I always feel."

"'Tis pull devil, pull baker, between him and Aunt Mercy," so Linda said, and David laughed.

"And he knows damn well when he's beat, and she knows damn well when she is," he said.

"But a beautiful tabby cat," I told him, because I always admired 'Arthur' myself.

Then they went off together.

"Now for 'Sunshine Lodge,'" said David, "though I always think 'Hell Corner' would have been a better name for it."

They tramped away chattering together, and the same evening I took Miss Gollop a dozen new-laid eggs and my good wishes. She was pleased but not much inclined to talk. She said she had been called to endure her nephew and nieces that afternoon and felt tired. Later on, having seen Tom off in the moonlight for some night work, I turned in where the sisters lived together, to ask them how their birthday party had fared. They dwelt in a little cottage on the front; but David boarded elsewhere, with Mrs. Ford, a sailor's widow.

Linda and Milly—full of their adventures—told me about them while they sewed, for both were famous needle-women and added to their small money in that way.

"We had a tolerable sultry afternoon along with her," said Linda, and Mildred, who liked to talk and spoke very vividly at times, took up the tale.

"As we got to her garden and I was admiring the white lilac tree still in flower over her lattice gate and saying how nice it smelled, Aunt Mercy looked out of her window upon us and told David to wipe his boots before we walked in; then we entered the house-place and there she was, in full state, sitting in her easy chair with her raven in his big cage alongside her. Linda and I rushed forward and kissed her and wished her many happy returns of the day, and David said 'Same here, and never saw you looking better, thank God'; but he didn't kiss her, because they never have been on what you might call kissing terms. She asked Dave if his boots were clean and he said they were spick-and-span and called her attention that he had donned his black to mark the happy day. Then Linda said how we all three circle round her, her being the head of our family."

"And never did our family have a better one, I told her," added Linda.

"Then 'Satan' croaked," went on Milly, "and Aunt Mercy told him to be quiet. 'I hope your beautiful bird has wished you many happy returns,' I said, and she answered and bade us not to blether about her anniversary no more. Then she plunged into things and showed us what was in her mind. 'I'm doing a bit of stock-taking touching you people,' she said, 'same as I did a year ago. And I tell you the same again as I did then. What you three do for me is only a sprat to catch a whale.' Then she ordered 'Satan' to hold his noise, because he would be talking and she continued, 'A sprat to catch a whale—just cheap human nature and I blame none of you for that.'"

"Then I cut in," interrupted Linda. "'A lot more than human nature, Aunt Mercy. We care for you yourself,'" I said.

"And she told you to dry up, because she didn't want any cant from you," proceeded Milly. "'You may deceive yourselves,' she said, 'but not me. So there it is,' she went on. 'I'm a woman of property as everybody knows, but I can't take my house and grounds where I'm going, nor my money neither. The dead are penniless the moment they draw their last breath. And you two and David are all I've got in the family line; and never an old woman suffered under such a beggarly set of relations: two laundresses and an in-shore fisherman.'

"Then I felt my indignation to be rising," continued Milly, "and I said 'We are as God made us and you have no right to expect too much from us, Aunt Mercy.' 'I don't,' she answered. 'I never expected anything from any of you. Your father was a born fool and your mother ought to have been in the asylum. Marriage is a toss-up best of times; but children are a proper mad gamble every time!' That's the way she talked."

"And I answered her," went on Linda. "I told her that our dear father and mother supported each other in their many difficulties. 'Broken reeds can't support each other,' she replied, and I reminded her that our mother always had a beautiful, giving nature. 'Yes,' she answered, snapping like the teeth of a rat-trap, 'one of those beautiful, giving natures that are always getting in a holy mess themselves and leaving hard, practical folk to pull 'em out.'"

"Darned few she ever lifted a finger to pull out of a mess," went on Milly. "But we were patient. 'Mother taught us to be good anyway,' David said to her, and the raven croaked and Aunt Mercy grinned. 'He's laughing at you, Dave,' she told him. 'Good for what?'"

"Then I spoke the answer," said Linda, "though only to have my mouth shut. 'Good to earn our living and do our duty in that state of life——.' I'd got that far when Aunt Mercy shut me up. 'No cant from you, Linda,' she snapped."

"What had she to grumble at next?" I asked.

"Plenty," replied Milly. "She said that when we'd all done praising ourselves, we could listen to her. 'My dispensations are made,' she told us, 'and Lawyer Townley knows 'em. And what I want you to understand for the minute is this: that if, for one instant you stop doing your duty to me, I'll mighty soon unmake my dispensations.'"

"Just wanted to quarrel," explained Linda, "so I tried to pour oil on the troubled waters, Pete. 'Come, come,' I said. ''Tis your birthday, Aunt Mercy, and you needn't fear we'll ever stop trying to pleasure you.' She calmed down a thought after that and said now the air was cleared, she'd get in a birthday humour, though at eighty-four it was difficult."

"Then she asked us what presents we'd brought to atone for ourselves and I produced my tin of tobacco," proceeded Milly. 'Here's my gift,' I said. 'A whole pound tin of the black Virginian you smoke, and a beautiful picture of Virginia and negroes working on the lid of it.' 'That's the stuff,' she agreed and sniffed at it. 'A whole pound—eh? You're chucking your money about,' she said. 'I saved for it,' I told her 'and I hope you'll smoke every bit yourself.'

'As my raven and my cat and my fiddle don't smoke,' she answered, 'no doubt I shall,' Then she wanted to know what Linda had rose to."

"Did she like the rum?" I asked and Linda answered.

" 'It's the Jamaica you're addicted to,' I told her and pressed the bottle into her hands; but she didn't like my choice of words too well, though she liked the gift. 'I ain't addicted to it at all,' she answered. 'I only take it for medicine; but a clever thought. You girls have done pretty well.' Then Dave promised to come in for a pipe sometimes and Aunt Mercy asked him what he'd brought. 'Here you are,' says Dave and takes his huge lobster out of the brown paper. 'A proper wonder and fit for a show-case and worth a lot.' 'Fresh?' she asked him. 'Out of the sea this morning—took in a pot off the Surf Rocks,' he answered."

"She granted it was large," continued Milly, taking up the tale. "However she bade me put it in the larder and told Linda to fetch her some lettuces and a spring onion or two to go with it to-morrow. 'I'll give it a try though not hopeful' she said, 'but it will serve "Satan" and "Arthur" if not me.' Then I inquired where 'Arthur' might be. 'Where's puss?' I asked. 'He ought to be along with you this afternoon.' 'You need never to ask where a cat is,' she answered. 'He's always where he wants to be. I had a row with my gentleman yesterday and bested him; and when I conquer him, he goes down to Mrs. Mutters and stops there till the clouds roll by.' She laughed then—a noise like a man whetting his scythe. Then she thanked us for our presents and told us they were a lot cleverer than last year."

" 'And may we all be cleverer still next year,' I said," went on Linda, "but she cut me short again. 'That'll do, my girl—no soap from you. I can't live for ever and don't want to,' she told us. 'That's that then,' summed up David, 'and now, to mark the glad day, I hope you're going to give us a tune on your fiddle.' But it seemed almost as if the raven knew Dave was lying, for it croaked in a properly scornful tone of voice, and he lost his temper. 'Damn it!' he cried out, 'can't I open my mouth but that blasted bird——?' He didn't get no further because Aunt Mercy was down on him. 'Stop swearing,' she ordered. 'Nobody swears in this house but me and swearing's gone weak now, like everything else. You ought to have heard your grandfather swear,' she said. 'The spiders shook in their webs and the pigs trembled in their styes when he let out. You all hate music and you girls sit and look as if you were waiting for the dentist when I draw my bow over the strings. But I ain't playing to-day. My mainstring's broke and I've wrote to Plymouth for a new one.' And Linda and I thanked God in secret.

"Next thing was that Dave made her an offer," continued Milly.

" 'How would it be if you come out for half an hour in *The Saucy Sally* along with me?' he asked. 'Do you good. Sea's like a billiards table and sun shining and all. I'll paddle you round and you can look at the sea-gulls.' "

Linda laughed then and took up the story.

"She told him she wouldn't go out in his rotten row-boat for the Bank of England. 'Did you ever hear tell of Peter Gollop?' she inquired, and I explained that we never heard the details because father and mother would never speak of him. 'Then I'll tell you about him—a good tale for my birthday party,' she said."

Then Milly launched out on the ugly subject of Peter Gollop.

"Aunt Mercy cheered up a bit then," she began. "She had known Peter Gollop and his wife when she was a child. 'The only murderer in our family,' she told us. 'We kicked over the traces a bit and were a fighting race and famous for it; but none was a killer before Peter. A quiet chap—a longshore fisherman, like you, David, but twice the man you are, or ever will be, and much handsomer. Very fond of animals and sang in the church choir. He married Penelope Bryant, the fish-hawker's daughter; but she was older than him and hated animals—poor fool. They didn't have much luck with each other at first, but, after a stormy year or two, they settled down and people reckoned they'd got broken in and the worst over.' "

"There never is no worst if you love each other proper from the start, Milly," I explained. "There never was no breaking in for me and Tom."

"You were broken in before you married," she answered and went on about her family murderer.

"A day came when Peter Gollop bought a new fishing-boat and took Penelope for a sail in her one morning when he went to pick up his pots outside Surf Rocks. Peter's wife would take the sea sometimes, same as you take the sea with Tom. But towards evening of that day his boat showed up crawling home with her little flag at half-mast; and when a fisher comes in with his flag half-masted, that means trouble. So a good few gathered on the mole to see him arrive. He was white as a dog's tooth and terrible shaken and, so soon as he could speak, he broke the fearful news. A squall had took the sail while he was steering and it had flapped over and knocked Penelope into the ocean. He'd done all a man might and very near lost his own life doing it—so he said; but the woman sank and didn't rise to the surface again. He knew the exact spot, behind Surf Rocks, where the fatal thing took place, and next morning the coast-guards put down a drag net and did their best to gather in the corpse—all to no purpose. They couldn't find her, and it wasn't till three days later that she

turned up. And Peter carrying on like a madman ashore, of course, and the folk very sorry for him. A Brixham boat it was that catched up Penelope, and the accident being known, her master brought the body into Beesworthy. So another craft fetched in with her flag at half-mast. Aunt Mercy laughed when she got so far. 'A nasty jar for Peter Gollop that was,' she said."

"Why should it be, Milly?" I asked. "The poor woman might well have drifted out where the trawlers work."

"Because, Pete," explained Mildred, "Penelope dead, told a different story from her husband living. There was a hundredweight of iron fastened to Penelope Gollop—an old kitchen range from Peter's junk store and identified for the one he'd took out of his kitchen when he put in a new range. And more than that; her head bones were broke in. He'd slain her and sunk her far out to sea. Peter hadn't a leg to stand upon before the law. When she'd told that, Aunt Mercy laughed and said, 'And one morning soon after, he hadn't anything else to stand upon either, because he was hanged at Exeter gaol.'"

"What a tale for a birthday party!" I exclaimed, then Linda had a turn.

"There was more to come, Pete. After this fearful story our aunt turned to David and said, 'So now you know why you'll never catch me out of sight of land behind Surf Rocks with you, my lad!' and Dave pretended to be shocked. 'That's next to libel,' he said, 'and if I went to Lawyer Townley, he might take you in court.' Then she laughed and told us for that matter she'd often wished she could cut the thread of certain parties herself.

" 'You must do nothing nefarious at your time of life,' I said to her. 'A shocking thing if you was to fall into homicide at eighty-four,' and she admitted it was beyond her now. 'You may still have the pleasure of thinking on a bit of wickedness,' she answered, 'but the flesh has gone too weak to perform it. You want good health and all your wits about you for a murder. You're a darned sight more likely to be murdered yourself at my time of life, so, if I went to sea with Dave and no eye upon us but our Maker's, he might find the pluck to come home alone, and no Christian burial for me then.' "

"David had an answer for that and hit back," went on Milly. "He said, ''Tis thought in the village you won't have no Christian burial whether or no, and Vicar Tozer will put you along with the doubtful ones—in the nettles at the bottom of the yard—all thanks to your godless ways.' Then Aunt Mercy snorted and said. 'What do Tozer know about God—fox-hunting young fool? If the impudent monkey was to deny me "Sure and Certain," I'd haunt him till he

called on the hills to cover him.' Then Dave spoke again. 'You'd make a fearsome ghost sure enough,' he said, and the raven croaked and Aunt Mercy laughed, but not at David—at a horrid idea she'd thought upon. 'There's one thing,' she said, much to her own amusement. 'I'd better like to neighbour with the "also rans" in next world than with the winners: I grant that!' "

"Meaning she'd be more likely to meet her old friends down under than up above," I suggested, and Milly agreed.

"Then I changed the conversation and turned her thoughts to us," she said. "I told her the family was near coming to an end now and it was time Dave took a wife and carried on. 'The likes of him carry on! Not a hope!' she answered. 'I'm the last of the Gollop race. You ain't true Gollops—none of you. We were tough, warlike, feared naught. We lived hard, fought hard, worked hard, made money, and our men bred hard stuff out of hard women. And when the children could earn their keep and knew they wasn't wanted no more, they hopped the nest and often went foreign. They were the sort the Colonies cry for.' "

"And then," continued Linda, "I told her it was a thousand pities she'd never wedded herself to carry on the fine quality. And I reminded her how it was well known she might have married Mr. Ramsbottom—him that taught her to play the fiddle and left her his fiddle in his will. 'Yes,' she said, 'I might have married Sam Ramsbottom, after his second wife died, and I believe in a man being a bit older than his wife for that matter; but not fifty years older. I was twenty when he offered for me, and he was seventy. But you can't put new wine in old bottles.' Then she said she could have married half a score of times, but never met a man up to her standards. 'Seventy-two inches tall on my naked feet in them days and straight as a larch pole,' she said."

"David made a remark then," continued Milly. "He thought there was few men would offer for a six-foot tall woman. 'Oh yes they did,' she said and smiled at her memory. 'I mind one that filled my eye very well,' she told us. 'Dick Danby he was called—a quarry-man. Six feet four inches and broad in the shoulder and lean in the flank, with arms like trip-hammers and strong as a team of horses. Handsome too.' "

"Why didn't she accept him then?" I inquired and Milly explained.

"I asked her that. She said she only cared for Danby's grand appearance and strength and usefulness; but she knew that if she'd took him, he'd have mastered her, and she never meant to be mastered by any man. 'We'd have bred a race of giants if I'd gone to him;

but I went to his funeral instead. Only funeral I ever shall go to but my own,' she said. You see the young man was blown to bits in a quarry, because his mate fired a charge too soon. And in Aunt Mercy's opinion, it was no accident, either. 'Yes,' she went on, after she had finished with Dick Danby, 'I was a comely piece then.' "

" 'And are so still,' I told her," continued Linda, "but all she answered was, 'No hypocrisy from you, please.' Then she told us how she had done work on our grandfather's farm that would break the back of a modern woman. 'They haven't got the bone and muscle I had. Nor young men either for that matter,' she said. But Dave stood up for the young men and assured her they were as hardy and brave as ever they were. And she said 'Brave? Who's brave that's frightened of work? If you dread work, then you're a coward, and real work this generation dread above all else.' "

"You must have had about enough of Miss Gollop's birthday by that time," I suggested to them and Mildred answered that they had.

"I thought we ought to get a move on, myself, about then," she said, "and I proposed we should help her lay the table for her birthday tea; but Aunt Mercy told us there wasn't going to be a birthday tea this year. 'No birthday tea! Well, I never,' cried David. 'Why, we thought we were going to sit down to a fat birthday cake with eighty-four candles blazing around it!' Just a spot of his fun, but she took it wrong, of course. 'And where the hell did you think eighty-four candles were coming from?' she asked him. Then she addressed us all. 'Thank you for your gifts and a plague on your good wishes,' she went on. 'Asking—that's what you are—always asking.' "

"But I withstood that," said Linda. " 'We've never asked for a penny, Aunt Mercy, never once in our lives,' I answered. 'Not with your lips,' she said, 'but I see it in your eyes. You've got beggars' eyes—the pack of you.' "

"What a horrible thing to tell you, Linda," I cried out.

"Yes, wasn't it? Then David rose up and said we'd go on our way and leave her alone in her glory. 'I'll drop in again before long and smoke a pipe with you,' he promised, and she said he'd be welcome if he didn't try to be funny, or smell of fish. Then she reminded me to fetch her lettuces and onions, and I said she should have 'em fresh out of the ground to-morrow morning on my way to work. 'That's right then,' she answered. 'Civility costs nothing and often pays a good return; and impudence often pays a mighty bad return. Remember that, Dave.' "

"Yet, on the top of this warning, if David didn't put his foot in it again!" said Mildred. "He didn't mean anything—it was just one of his stupid jokes you understand—but, as we were trooping off with

our tails between our legs, so to say, he turned and asked Aunt Mercy a sly question. 'You don't want the corkscrew put beside you by any chance before we go?' he asked, and then the raven croaked and our old terror blazed into one of her thunderstorms and her eyes flashed like black lightning."

"Whatever did she say?" I begged to know.

"She poured out a flood of profanity," answered Milly, "which I am not going to repeat, and she told David to go to the devil and not to show his hideous face to her again before she ordered him. We left her and her raven chattering together and staggered out utterly exhausted into the fresh air."

"What a properly fearful birthday party!" I said, and Linda spoke.

"David brought the rebuke on himself all the same," she declared, "and I told him you ought never to mention a delicate subject like a corkscrew to a well-known drinker. But, for the minute, he was angrier with 'Satan' than he was with her. 'I'd give a week's money to strangle that bird,' he said. 'No, Dave, the bird's innocent,' I answered. 'She's taught him to be so rude as herself.' 'Innocent!' he shouted. 'The creature knows everything you tell and laughs in your face as if you were dirt!' 'You may amuse him,' I said, 'but you didn't amuse her. She don't like your light touches and you're a fool to make 'em with Aunt Mercy.'"

"She wasn't feeling very well this afternoon," so Mildred said next. "I always know."

"And I advised Dave it was no good riding the high horse and poking fun at such as her," added Linda. "Because, if you depend upon your betters for your security, same as most of us have got to do, then you need to treat them in a Christian manner even though they are heathens themselves. David said how every human being hungers to conquer sometimes, which was the Gollop blood in him no doubt, and I told him that Milly and I had long learned to conquer ourselves."

"So we have," added Milly, "and the only people we ever did conquer, I'm sure."

I made ready now to leave them and go down to the beach, because Tom was pretty near due back; but they hadn't quite finished their sad tale.

"There was one ray of brightness arose out of the afternoon, as David pointed out," said Linda. "We hadn't marked it, but he had. 'It's to the good,' he said, 'that her dispensations run in our favour,' and we asked how he knew that. 'Because she thought to terrify us when she said she might change 'em even yet,' he explained. 'As they stand they are probably all right, so we must humour the old curse a bit more. Most likely a drop extra of rum yesterday made her

so acid to-day.' I agreed with him, so did Milly, because nothing puts an edge to a man's tongue like a hang-over."

"Then I asked him how it might be if we sounded Lawyer Townley as to her intentions," went on Milly, "but Dave said he wouldn't be legalised to tell us. 'He's always very civil to us—a good sign that, because he knows what's in the will and is wishful to keep our custom after she's gone,' so Dave said."

"There's a lot happens at 'Sunshine Lodge' only known to her cat and her raven and her conscience," continued Milly. "I touched her affairs delicate to Aunt Mercy once and asked her if we might run about for her a bit more and do what she wanted; but she said that we hadn't got the brain-power to know what an old woman wanted, though we weren't far short of old women ourselves nowadays. Sometimes I think her brain's tottering."

"A mystery she's lived and a mystery she'll die," summed up Linda. "I always long to feel more hopeful where the poor old soul's going after she's gone," she sighed. "I'd like to think the Everlasting Mercy would overlook her career——"

Then Mildred went rather far, for she laughed and spoke very coarsely.

"A fat lot I mind where she's going," she said, "all I care about is when."

I felt to have had about enough of the Gollops by then and left them and went out into the moonlight air and presently helped Tom bring in his catch. Little did we think at the time what was blowing up for David and Milly and Linda, and my husband only laughed to hear about their dismal afternoon.

"Father told me once," he said, "that you can guess at a dead man's shoes most times, but never at a dead woman's. Least of all such a woman as old Mercy."

So that was the beginning of the strange affairs to follow and I got drawn into them—not against my own will exactly, but very much to my astonishment.

CHAPTER VIII

LITTLE did anybody guess what next morning was going to bring forth, not only for the Gollops, but for the parish you might almost say. In itself it was just a common act of nature, but behind it, there arose most fantastic complications and something to talk about for weeks. I was in it from the beginning, for next morning, after shopping in Beesworthy, I met Linda Gollop. She and Mildred

lways went home from their work for dinner, but she was alone and ery late and by no means herself. A most calm, quiet woman as a ule with nothing to catch the eye about her, but to-day she was valking fast and a lock of her hair had come unloosed and her hat vasn't straight and her mild little face looking as wild as a hawk.

"My stars, Linda!" I said, "what's over-got you, my dear? You ook so mad as a March hare!"

"The day of my life, Pete," she gasped out. "Signs and wonders—gns and wonders!"

Well, to hear Linda say such a thing was wonderful enough without ny additions, and she begged me to go home with her and hear the hole tale.

"Milly don't know a word yet," she said, "but the parish will ng with it before nightfall I expect. If you like to come along, you hall hear, Pete."

I didn't feel much disposed to the Gollops again this morning—not ıfter yesterday night—but I couldn't well refuse to come and felt nore inquisitive than usual seeing Linda's appearance.

"I'll come certainly if I can be of any use to you," I told her and nended my pace, for still she pushed on very fast.

Milly was waiting for her in their cottage, and cross and worried ıt that.

"At last!" she said. "Where the mischief have you been—rightening my soul out of my body?"

"Oh, Milly—oh my dear life—what a day! Let me sit down. My legs is dropping off me," puffed Linda.

"I'll tell you one thing," began her sister. "The manager emanded to hear where you was got to, and I told him I didn't know :om Adam. I said you'd started as usual before me and I counted ɔ find you at work. And he was furious. He said it might suit the oal-miners to go absconding, but it didn't suit the laundry for his .omen to do so. And he said if your fancy calls you to keep away again, you can stop away."

"Give me something to drink for Lord's sake," gasped Linda. "There's times when your duty cries out louder than your business. I'd got to abscond by the will of God and what I have to tell would fill a book."

"Tell it then," answered her sister. "Here's your dinner—the end of the mutton and cold as charity by now. And we'd best be going to work if we don't both want to get fired."

"The day of my life in a manner of speaking," said Linda still panting and gazing wildly upon us.

"Somebody asked you to marry him?" asked Milly in her grim Gollop way.

Linda drank off a cup of tea and started.

"The beginning was that I rose up a thought early before you were awake or the alarm had gone, to obey Aunt Mercy's orders. First I went to Dingle's, and there he was, good and early too, and I bought two lettuces, with the dew fresh on 'em, for a penny and another penny for a few spring onions. Then off to 'Sunshine Lodge' and heard church clock tell half-past seven as I got there. Plenty of time and the sun up over the sea and her white lilac scenting the morning air."

"Never mind all that," said Milly. "Get on with it."

"I expected to find her up of course," went forward Linda. "Seven-thirty being her breakfast hour since living memory. But she wasn't up."

"Not up at half-past seven!" I exclaimed.

"No, Pete. Not up at half-past seven, and the white blind down over her bedroom window still. And other wondrous events beside that. There stood her milk bottle, waiting to be took in and beside it sat 'Arthur,' also waiting to be took in."

"Back from Mrs. Mutters?" I said.

"Never mind all that. What did you do?" asked Mildred.

"A rash thing for me," admitted Linda. "The situation spurred me to pick up a pinch of gravel and chuck it up at her window to rouse her. But there was a sizeable little stone along with the gravel and the next thing I saw, I'd broke her bottom pane on the left hand side—cracked right across!"

"She'll make you pay for that," said Milly.

"So I thought and expected to see her glare out and was half in a mind to flee," answered Linda. "But nothing happened, so then I knew something *must* have happened and I went round to the window of her new scullery, hoping she'd forgot the window-latch. She never forgets the front door, but is very prone to forget that window-latch. She had, so I rose the window and climbed in the house that way with my heart in my mouth by now. Then a voice sounded out of the silence."

"Her?" asked Milly.

"No, 'Satan.' I took the blanket off his cage and he was very pleased to find his day had begun and surprised to see me and not Aunt Mercy. Never a sound of her yet, so I called out loud and said the hour was late and I'd fetched in with her green stuff for the lobster. And the raven shouted too; but not a word in response. Then 'Arthur' mewed at the door and a cat never mews without

a reason and a most horrible terror overtook me that Aunt Mercy had fallen a victim to bad characters in the dead of night—her being just the one to court such things."

"No signs of violence, Linda?" I asked.

"All orderly as usual, so I nerved myself and mounted the stairs and knocked at her bed-chamber door. Thrice I knocked—each time louder than the last—but no answer. Naught but a feeling of gathering emptiness, in the house and in my stomach. I never felt so empty before. So I put up a prayer for support and opened the door and went in. But nothing looked to be out of the way at all. There was her huge shape lying in the bed curled up and comfortable as need be. Then I pulled up the blind and let in the sunshine and confronted her. The first thing I saw was my birthday present—the bottle of rum—on her bed-table along with a tumbler and a jug of water. The bottle was three parts empty. Her last act had been to take it to bed with her."

"Her 'last act' you say?" inquired Milly with a hungry look in her face. "Not only just dead drunk?"

"Far more than dead drunk," answered Linda. "She wasn't drunk and she wasn't asleep. I went to her and found her eyes wide open—fixed upon me as I thought; but they were sightless. There was a film drawn over them, they'll never flash no lightning at nobody again. She was dead and her candle burnt down to the candle-stick beside her."

"Gone! Really and truly gone!" said Milly.

"Yes," answered Linda. "Gone, and well content, seemingly. She looks a happier corpse than ever I saw her to look in her life. Calm and ten years younger too. Almost a touch of triumph on her old face and them deep lines scored across her forehead all ironed out you might say. She could have been quite a religious woman by the look of her."

"Triumph on her face?" asked Milly. "Fancy that!"

"She was triumphant over death," explained her sister. "Just a passing flash, like a rainbow. But it don't last. Soon fades away."

"Are you positively certain she was dead, Linda?" I inquired.

"Oh yes—very dead, Pete," she answered. "You couldn't be so cold as what Aunt Mercy is unless you was dead. The North Pole's self ain't so cold as death. But then a hideous thought came over me. My brain was in a proper whirl of excitement by now and out of control for the moment and I shook with terror."

"Well you might, I'm sure," I agreed; but Milly didn't see anything hideous about it.

"Why hideous? If she's triumphed over death, then it's our

turn to triumph over life for once," she said. "What did you want to shake for?"

"I wasn't thinking of us; I was thinking of David," explained Linda. "My mind suddenly fixed on him and his lobster and I got a feeling that she might have cooked it last night, only to find too late it was a wrong'un. And then I pictured Doctor Meadows probing into Aunt Mercy and finding venom inside her and the lobster giving witness and Dave on trial for his life very likely."

"Steady yourself, Linda, my dear," I begged her. "Stuff and rubbish!"

"I'm glad to say it was stuff and rubbish," she replied. "But I had to prove it. I rushed to her larder then and thanked God to see Dave's great fish gazing down at me from the shelf and his whiskers twirling as if he was alive yet. Then I took in the milk, and went straight off to widow Manlove—her that nurses the sick and lays out the dead. I told her Aunt Mercy was gone in her sleep without a pang and asked her to run and do the needful. Which she did the moment she'd swallowed her breakfast. She said that to pass over in your slumber was a merciful reward kept for saints as a rule and not usual with characters like Aunt Mercy. And next I went off to Dr. Meadows with the news and catched him in good time before he went on his morning round. I drove along with him back to 'Sunshine Lodge' in his dog-cart, and there was Manlove at work already. The doctor didn't stop above three minutes. He looked down upon the body and just hummed to himself as he often will. He sang under his breath and it sounded like 'Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum.' Then he said, more to himself than me, 'So the old buccaneer's gone at last!' After that he told me he wasn't surprised and pointed to her birthday present I'd given her on the bed-table. I'll give you the 'all clear' to-morrow,' he said. 'No need for an inquest. Just alcoholic poisoning and nobody to blame but herself.'"

Then Mildred gave evidence of the shock she had suffered and turned to Linda. "I've got my palpitations," she told us. "You wouldn't think good news could bring 'em on, but it has."

Milly was subject to the flutters now and again and they always kept a medicine bottle on the dresser against them, so Linda fetched it now and poured a drop.

"Good news is more palpitating than bad," she explained, "because it's such a lot rarer. Drink it down, Milly."

Mildred gurgled a bit and gave her sister credit.

"Well might you forget the laundry and abscond," she said. "Where did you run next?"

"I went off to Mr. Blades and told him the fatal news. He'll be up to take his measurements this evening."

"We don't like Blades at Birch Hanger," I said. "When old Sarah Blanchard died, he annoyed father."

"Nobody likes him," agreed Milly, "yet if there's one man that ought to ooze sympathy it's an undertaker, I should think."

"No sympathy there," went on Linda. "All he said was that it would need to be an outsize casket for such a large defunct and asked if it was to be elm wood, or if we felt disposed to run to oak. And I said we mustn't be hurried over a nice thing like that."

"Certainly not," added Milly. "Everything has got to be done seemly and David will decide."

"For elm if I know him," said Linda; and then I reminded them of their position.

"You're in the news now," I told them, "and must behave accordingly. When do you count on David coming in?"

"He knows by now," said Linda. "I went down to Mrs. Ford, where he lodges, and she reckoned he was due off the sea. He'll be here any minute."

Mildred had been thinking about the dead woman and her palpitations were passed.

"I lay she went at the zero hour," she told us. "All Gollops go at the zero hour, when the sun's farthest away from the universe—round about one o'clock of a morning. And if I'd known her climax was so close, I wouldn't have spoke some things about her I did speak yesterday."

"More wouldn't I," said Linda.

"What's in reason when folk are alive, may sound a thought harsh after they're dead," I agreed.

"You can't be too careful what you say to the aged ones—whether it's true or not," pointed out Linda. "We'll hope she's as peaceful as she looks."

"She's opened the way to peace for us anyway," said Milly.

"Peace, if not plenty," agreed her sister.

"Plenty too, it ought to be—what would be plenty to us, anyway. We've earned it."

"In justice, yes; but she never set great store on justice—to say kindly," declared Linda.

Then there was a tramp of feet—pretty brisk ones for him—and David came in.

"What ho!" he cried. "Is the glad news true?"

"True by this hand: she's gone," so Linda told him.

"Died at zero hour, David—on the turn of the night—just a natural, human death," said Milly.

"First natural, human thing ever she did then," he answered.

"Alcoholic poisoning and all quite in order," explained Linda, while David couldn't hide his delight.

"You'll have to take her passing in a proper spirit, Dave," I warned him.

"Rum was her proper spirit. Rum conquered her as I always knew it would," he replied; then Linda also urged him to be serious.

"We should all battle to see the good in her now, David," she said. "Never visible to the naked eye, yet hid deep down somewhere for certain."

"As for the good in her, that all depends upon her dispensations. I never saw a mite of good in her," replied old Mercy's nephew. "But it may have crept into her will."

"I do hope for all your sakes it has," I told them and prepared to go.

"Seeing we were everything she'd got, we've a right to feel hopeful," declared Milly.

"Hopeful, yes, and more—confident," answered her brother. "She's been our star of hope for thirty years and you've got to consider common sense and her views in general. She'd never have left a penny to Charity, nor any good causes. She hated 'em. Why? Because she swore to me that they who left their money to pious uses were fools. 'When such people die,' she said, 'their good intentions are always set at naught to suit the greed of the living. The dead may feel kindly to the poor, but the living never do.' That's what she said."

"Easy to steal from the dead, if you'd sink to such a thing," I agreed. "I hope you'll have a proper just will, David."

"The question is how far our expectations will travel along with her dispensations, Pete," he replied.

"Not very far, I'd say," remarked Linda.

"On the face of it, granted, but you're dealing with a friendless woman without a supporter but us," explained David. "About as welcome as winter anywhere, and she knew it and gloried in it. There's nobody but us, because any trustable friends she may have had are all dead and gone years ago."

He turned to me.

"This is private," he said, "but I've no objection to letting you in on it if you'll keep it to yourself, you being my sisters' friend."

I promised I would and, feeling the confidence a compliment is

a way, stopped to listen. Then he unfolded how his Aunt Mercy had stood so far as he knew.

"You can fix her money at round about five thousand pounds," he began. "That was the figure she named to me long since. Years and years ago, and she was drunk at the time, or next thing to it. She wouldn't have squeaked about her money else, but plenty only tell the truth when they're half-seas over. Then there's her goods and chattels and house and grounds. And me being the head of the family, they're mine."

"You're head of the family now no doubt," admitted Linda.

"Certainly I am," he said, "but I've thought this out I may tell you and I shall be prepared to let you and Milly live at 'Sunshine Lodge' along with me and look after me till I ordain to marry and have a wife at my command. Then you'll clear out, because she's little likely to care for any other woman in my house but her. The premises won't want much done to them. Aunt Mercy always kept everything tip-top. Just new wall-papers and trifles like that. And I needn't to have a gardener once a fortnight like she did; because you two can look after that and dig and delve and grow the vegetables I favour. And I'll pay for the seeds."

I felt pretty indignant with Dave to hear what he'd planned for his sisters and Mildred took up the subject pretty quick, because she was indignant too.

"So that's what you think?" she asked him. "We've been at her beck and call, granted, but we wouldn't much feel like being at your beck and call, so you'd best to know it here and now."

And Linda showed a spark of spirit also.

"Who's worked for her and toiled for her all these ages past? Us, or you? Who's earned her money? Us, or you, Dave?" she asked.

"As for the money, I wouldn't put no claim to all of it for a moment," replied the man. "You must have your dip; but the head of the family always comes first and he's got to look to the upkeep of the property."

I thought they all sounded a lot too hopeful and ventured to whisper words of caution.

"She wasn't an ordinary woman, so she's not likely to have drawn an ordinary will," I said.

"And no need for us to bicker until there's anything to bicker about. She's got to be buried first and she always wanted to be buried among the ancient Gollops," said Linda. "Sexton told me once they were as thick up there as sardines in a tin."

"I'll see sexton come presently," decided David and Linda's mind ran on to the details.

"Nobody's going to send flowers, of course," she foretold, "but there ought to be a trophy on her coffin from the family."

"We can break off a bit of the white lilac," suggested Milly.

"Black pansies were her favourite flowers," said Linda, "and black her favourite colour for that matter. That's why she neighboured with her raven and always wished 'Arthur' was a black and not a tabby."

"There won't be many to see her go to ground," said David. "She wasn't one to get much of a rally at her grave-side."

"Mr. Forrester ought to come, when you think of all the bottles of liquor she bought off him," I suggested.

"And it was mine that broke the camel's back, poor soul," added Linda.

Then Mildred turned to another question of the future.

"What shall you do as to a name-stone over her?" she asked her brother.

"Depends upon the will if there's going to be a name-stone," he answered, but Linda protested at that.

"All the Gollops have a name-stone. 'Tis their last dignity to have one," she told David. "There are slates up there far older than Queen Victoria."

"And so crooked as a row of drunken men," he replied. "Naked grass is more dignified than a lop-sided slate."

"You feel there's few don't deserve a stone," explained Linda. "They keep the dead in mind, Dave, and if they say anything it's friendly, so long as the words are plain and anybody left to read 'em."

"Stuck up to save the face of the corpse most times," he answered scornfully. "The living knows the truth about 'em, and the next generation won't care a button whether they were good or bad."

"Stone or none, she's got to have a coffin, and is it going to be oak, or elm, Dave?" asked Linda. "Mr. Blades was wishful to know and you can't wait for the will to decide that."

"Elm," he said promptly. "Oak's only an advertisement for the mourners and no honour to the dead. Blades makes a lot of fancy money out of the people's grief; but he won't make none out of ours. Dignity at a funeral—yes; but no fireworks for Aunt Mercy."

I didn't like such sentiments myself, but they were natural to a grasping man like David Gollop, so I took another line to distract his mind.

"I was thinking of 'Arthur,'" I said. "I suppose you girls will take on the cat for a memento of Miss Gollop and watch over him?"

"No," replied Milly. "We both have a strong feeling against ats and pets in general, and 'Arthur' knows it. He can settle with Mrs. Mutters. She was always his home from home when things got so hot for him."

"And touching the raven, he ought to be remembered," I reminded them.

"I'm not likely to forget him," said Dave. "You can leave 'Satan' to me."

"Not if she's left him to somebody else," I suggested. "She set high store by him."

"He'd be what you call a 'white elephant,' Pete, black though he is," said Mildred. "He eats so much as a growing child."

"Best cast him loose, to make friends with the other birds," advised Linda, who was always the most merciful one in the family.

But Milly doubted.

"No decent fowl would want to neighbour with him," she said.

"He might pick up with another raven and have the time of his life," I suggested.

"You can leave 'Satan' to me," repeated David in a dangerous tone of voice; but I ventured to say how the bird had always been very dear to his aunt.

"Dear at any price to anybody," he said, which was a pretty good joke for him and we all laughed. But Linda protested.

"I'm sure we didn't ought to hear a cackle on our lips to-day," she told us.

Milly had been running on again in her mind and spoke of when the funeral was over.

"We must show everybody we understand," she explained. "There ought to be a sit-down meal at 'Sunshine Lodge' after. That's only right. We must bury her with a ham and cold chicken and a bottle of brown sherry wine for the mourners, Dave."

"Only there won't be any mourners," said Linda, which was a facer for Milly.

"More there won't," she answered. "I never thought of that."

"I'll be a mourner if you like," I told them. "She was always very kind to me."

"For what she could get," declared David. "We might ask Lawyer Townley and give him a snack before he opens the will."

"You come, Pete. You're our best friend, be it as it may," begged Linda, and I said I would certainly come to the funeral if no more. Then David showed how his thoughts were expanding and now he was expanding with them.

"I'm the big noise for the minute," he announced, "and quite equal to handling the job as you'll find."

"Our standards of living ought to go up in future," agreed Milly, who was always very practical, and Linda shared her opinion, but felt a doubt.

"Life will widen out for all of us, though how we shall set about to widen it, I couldn't say," she remarked. "If you've been called to live on a three-penny piece ever since you was born and planned small according, it will ask for a lot of thought to start planning big. Shall you go down to water any more, David, or feel yourself to be a gentleman at large as they say?"

It amazed me at the time how they took the future for granted in their simple fashion and I stared at Linda.

"I shall be a gentleman at large for a bit," answered her brother, "but not in Beesworthy. I ain't going to start spending a fortune on free drinks here. You can be a gent at large all right without chucking your money away on other people."

"Wouldn't be a gent at large very long if you did," I said.

"How will you pleasure yourself, Dave?" asked Linda, and he thought he might run down to Plymouth for a while and watch other people working.

"Would you like for us to come with you?" she inquired; but he declined.

"That wouldn't suit me," he told her. "You two can bide here and mop up at 'Sunshine Lodge' and get ready for the sale."

The women didn't count their chickens before they were hatched, quite as certain as their brother.

"Do we carry on at the laundry?" asked Linda, and Milly doubted.

"The trouble there would be that if we started being ladies at large, they'd sack us," she explained. "I'd dearly love to throw it up, just to spite the manager."

"Spite's a luxury, and we don't know yet for certain if we can afford to be spiteful to him," admitted Linda.

"Stick to the wash-tubs till you know where you stand," I advised, and David agreed to that.

"That's right. Same as I shall stick to *Saucy Sally* till I buy a better boat presently," he said. "Honest work's its own pleasure."

"It may be in a new boat," answered Milly, "not in a laundry. You never heard a washer-woman gloating about her honest work. What I'd like best in the world would be a nice little cosy shop-of-all-sorts."

"Not all-sorts, Milly. A shop for Berlin wool work and such-like

a ladies' shop with knitting materials and poker work and uminated texts and coloured note-paper."

That was Linda, but we didn't agree.

"There's far more to a shop of 'all-sorts,' " said Milly, "and there e no ladies in Beesworthy in any case."

"Better take comfort in the present before you start to arrange the ure," I advised, and they agreed that showed good sense in me.

"We can sum up what we've got and be thankful so far," admitted illy. "To me the first blessed thing is that we shall never, never have list to that awful fiddle again. Never again! What I've suffered d the perspirations endured and the struggles to keep from eaming!"

"Music always makes you go hysterical," so Linda pointed out.

"Music!" cried Milly. "If that was music, then a pig being lled is music. And she knew we hated it and scraped on and on to rture us."

"Other folks' sufferings always tickled her to death—poor dear," lmitted Linda.

Then David spoke again of his intentions.

"I don't will for there to be one item left at her house to call unt Mercy back," he told them. "A clean sweep of everything at's marketable and a bonfire for all that is not."

That sounded hard to me but they approved.

"Same here I'm sure," agreed Milly. "I shall always smart to ink how she shortened our lives."

"Brought the grey to our heads full ten years too quick," added nda. "Nothing ages anybody like a tyrant over them."

"You'll find yourselves feeling a lot younger now you can call ur souls your own," I said cheerfully, but Linda sighed.

"Where's her soul now, I wonder?" she asked. "Such a peaceful ght, with the moon playing on the sea and the waves just whispering the beach, and Aunt Mercy slipping away like a fed baby off its other's nipple. You'd have thought, when she was called, there ould have been thunder and lightning and black clouds and the sea ging. But all peace and no saint of God ever passed to glory easier."

Which showed Linda had a streak of the romantic in her I never ıessed at. But there was nothing romantic about her brother.

"All the nastier surprise for the old bitch when she finds where e's got to," he said in his brutal way.

There came a knock at the door then.

"Who's that, I wonder?" asked Mildred.

"Somebody sent to know why you ain't at your work most like," plied David.

"Sympathy beginning to pour in, I expect," thought Linda, and Milly agreed there might be a few crocodile tears shed. Then they went together to the door and, when they were out of ear-shot, David turned to me.

"Don't you let 'em launch out into a shop, or any foolery like that, Pete," he urged me. "They're not built to make money in a shop. If they want to be notable women, let 'em cleave to any capital that's coming their way. Your security depends on your money-value and only the secure get any respect from anybody."

Then they came chattering back, and with them they brought the lawyer.

"Here's Mr. Townley been so kind as to call on us in our bereavement," said Milly, and the visitor spoke.

He was very popular with the people and held trustable by all. He would come to Birch Hanger sometimes for a chat with father, and he did our business and always had a brace of partridges or pheasants every autumn. He was a good-looking, middle-aged man with very bright blue eyes and a pair of sandy-coloured whiskers—old-fashioned, even in those days, and not to be seen in our times. Mr. Townley wore knickerbockers of Scots tweed and a tie of blue spotted white. He always rode a "safety" bicycle—a machine that had lately been invented and come into fashion.

He turned to David now and expressed his sorrow.

"Just heard the sad news from Dr. Meadows, Gollop," he said, "and thought I'd look in for half a minute. A shock for you, I'm afraid."

But Dave wanted no sympathy and didn't pretend he did.

"A death in the family is all to the good now and then. It clear the air," was what he said, and Mr. Townley showed himself surprised

"Well, that's one way to look at it no doubt," he admitted. "I think the old lady knew her sands were running out and her life drawing to a close. It's good to hear she slept away without pain."

"Be pleased to sit down, Mr. Townley," begged Linda, and I rose to go. Milly, however, restrained me. I think they wanted the lawyer to know their aunt had friends besides him. Indeed she said so.

"She can bide, can't she?" asked Milly. "A very good friend to Aunt Mercy always and a good friend of ours, too."

"Certainly Mrs. Appleby can stop," he said. "A good friend to everybody, like her father is. I've been acquainted with Pete since she was a toddler and never met a nicer one, for all she's turned into a married woman nowadays. I've heard your aunt give her a good word, which was rare."

I got red as a rose before such praises and felt very uncomfortable,

sat down and shut up. After that David went on, naturally not
g attention drawn off himself.
"Our relative," he said, "was a bad old woman—shifty and cruel
l no bowels of compassion in her. So enough said. She led a
oked life."
Mr. Townley opened his blue eyes to the full and put up his right
d to his right whisker and kept it there.
"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I've known the old lady a good many
rs now and always thought her quite the most amusing and original
ny clients. A survival from more spacious ages than this."
"An 'early Victorian' I've heard her called, Mr. Townley," said
da.
"Bless you—far earlier than our gracious sovereign," he answered.
n Elizabethan from the days of Drake and Raleigh—even earlier
an our Golden Age in truth. A cave-woman! A primitive!
s, a troglodite!"
We stared to hear such things. My learning took me back to
ueen Elizabeth, but I'd never heard of nothing to be called 'a
oglodite.'"
But he talked on.
"She and I had many a rare tussle in our time," he declared;
ut Miss Gollop knew she couldn't hoodwink me—also that she
uld trust me."
"They untrustable people always do know where they can put
eir own trust," said David grimly, and the lawyer agreed.
"Very true. Rogues are often excellent judges of honesty," he
plied, and then returned to their aunt.
"But you mustn't call Miss Mercy a rogue. Primitive—that's the
rd. Tricky, crafty, wilful, combative and fond of telling absurd
s, but often only for the fun of them when she tried to get a rise
t of me. Disposed to break the law if she didn't like it, perhaps;
t she was a law to herself."
He stopped and laughed—a big, hearty laugher he was—and then
ncluded his remarks on his old customer.
"A real museum specimen if you took her the right way and kept
ır patience. I shall miss her a great deal. You won't have
:ided anything about the funeral yet, but let me know when you
I must certainly attend if I can manage it and I'll see you people
erwards and give you all particulars."
"That will pleasure us very well, Master," answered Milly.
/e'll gather at her house and listen to you open out the will after
's gone to ground."
"Good. I'll come; but I shan't open the will, my friend, because

there's no will to open," said Mr. Townley; which shook them up a good bit.

Dave was speechless but Milly voiced all three.

"No will!" she cried out. "Why, our aunt told us only yesterday when we were with her for her birthday, how she'd made her dispensations. And then she threatened to change them if we didn't carry on to suit her."

The lawyer laughed again.

"She would!" he answered. "Yes, my dear, plenty of dispensations I can assure you, and I've got them—every one of them—in her own handwriting for all of you to see."

"And why no proper will?" asked David.

"Because she wouldn't make one and, try as I did, I couldn't prevail. She was positive that to write your will is to sign your own death-warrant. One of her many ridiculous superstitions. She swore she knew countless cases where rash men and women had done so and died inside twelve months."

"She told me the same," I said after Mr. Townley had finished. "She warned me against any such thing if I valued my life. She believed in all manner of dark truths hid in the past and overlooked nowadays by silly fools who fancied they knew better than the dead."

"Well," he went on. "Miss Mercy made her wishes exceedingly clear, as she always had the art to do."

"Of course we trust you, Mr. Townley," said Linda. "Who wouldn't?"

"You safely can," he assured them. "Dishonest lawyers are not as common as some people imagine. But there is no need to trust me. Miss Gollop has left very definite instructions and spent a good deal of time and thought upon them."

"We all know her penmanship," so Milly told him. "Like a spider trying to get home after he's dropped in the ink-pot."

He laughed at that and said it was a very good description of her writing.

"And now good-bye for the present," he finished up. "Some of you had better go and stop at 'Sunshine Lodge' till the funeral and look after her pets."

"Linda and I will go, Mr. Townley," promised Milly. "Good-bye, Sir, and thank you for calling."

"Good-bye, Master," said David, and Linda offered to show him out.

"'Tis a great land-mark gone, Mr. Townley," she told him.

"Indeed it is," he replied. "A link with the vanishing past."

When he was off, Milly showed a good bit of indignation over one hing he had spoken.

"He didn't ought to have called Aunt Mercy a museum specimen," she said, "—cheek, that was."

"What did he mean?" asked David. "What is a museum specimen, Pete?"

"Mostly things got so old as to be curiosities," I explained. "When father took me once to Exeter museum, there were museum specimens by the score—all out of date now. Even Egyptian mummies, older than Exeter itself, from thousands and thousands of years ago, all wrapped up in their withered grave-clothes—hideous affairs—yet fearfully exciting to see. But of course Mr. Townley didn't mean your Aunt Mercy should be put in a glass case for a show."

"Then what did he mean?" asked David.

"A piece of impertinence, whatever he meant," declared Milly, "and I don't think none the better of him for it."

"What I took most count of was his telling about no will," said David. "If there's no will, there's no security."

Linda came back then.

"He's trundled away on his bike," she told us. "I tried to get a few particulars; but he won't throw any light till after the funeral."

"They hate divulging—they lawyers," explained David. "A proper passion with 'em to keep you guessing about the secrets of the dead."

"He's a most honourable man, and my father's friend, Dave," I said.

"He may be," he replied, "but he ought to have got a proper, lawful will out of her—signed and sealed and witnessed. He should have frightened her into it if need be."

Linda sniggered at that.

"Whoever frightened Aunt Mercy?" she asked.

I felt in my bones by then it was more than time I faded away. So I hopped it, and nobody asked me to linger because they had important affairs to occupy their conversation now.

At home I told Tom the story and he was a good bit interested but advised me to keep out of it and not push in where I didn't belong.

"They are a stupid lot," he said, "and, finding themselves on the centre of the stage for a minute will go to their heads very likely."

"In a manner of speaking, it has," I told him, "because to take everything for granted like they do, and feel sure she's left them her fortune—just because they were her only relations—looked to me like counting your chickens before they are hatched. In plain truth she didn't care for them very much, Tom."

"How do you know she didn't?" he asked.

"Firstly from what Linda told me about the party yesterday," I said. "She related faithfully all that had happened and it didn't show up her opinion of any of them in a very favourable light; and secondly from what Miss Gollop said to me when I looked in with some eggs for her yesterday, after the party was over and they'd gone home. She spoke of them with much disfavour and told me Dave was a bad-mannered, lazy lout and, when I stood up for his sisters, she said they were a tiresome, fussy pair of nincompoops, without the brains of a titmouse between them."

"There you are then," said Tom. "Don't that show they are pitching their hopes a lot too high? Townley's kept the old woman out of many a scrape, so I've heard my father say."

Tom had his own affairs to think upon just then, because he was in the process of selling *Petronella* for a new boat. There was nothing wrong with her, but he wanted something bigger and faster. He couldn't buy a new one, however, till he had sold her and now I spoke of a possible chance to do so.

"It's agreed, seemingly, that Dave's *Saucy Sally* is on her beam ends so to say," I told him, "and he grants himself she's worn out and past praying for, so if he does get his aunt's money, you might do a deal in that quarter."

"I have it in mind," he said. "His boat's no longer seaworthy and I hope he will come into enough to buy mine. In fact we are talking about it."

CHAPTER IX

MICAH WIDECOMBE came in to see us that evening I remember. Micah was Tom's best friend and they were greatly attached to each other. Everybody liked him and he had the name for a good and able shoesmith and most kind-hearted chap; but when I say that everybody liked him, I have to remember one who didn't like him well enough at any rate to marry him. After our wedding, young Widecombe, who stood best man for Tom, fell in love himself with a very nice and comely maid, daughter of my father's own cowman at Birch Hanger. Ellen Coaker she was called and a handsome piece and wife-old and oncoming. But she couldn't see herself taking Micah and he was a lot cut up when she refused him for the third time of asking. A placid and steadfast man as a rule and cheerful by nature, yet his failure in love damped him down a great deal and we saw a lot of him at the time, because he drew a sort of

left-handed comfort from telling all the details of how he lost her. However he had long got over it by now, and only a month before Miss Gollop died, when Ellen left Birch Hanger and married a baker at Kingsbridge, such was Micah's generous disposition that he made her a little, bright, brass horse-shoe for luck and came to the wedding, which was celebrated at Birch Hanger, out of respect for our cowman.

To-night Micah quite agreed with Tom, that the Gollop family might be taking too much for granted. He was a big, powerful man, three inches taller than my husband, with a round, full face, brown eyes, a close-cropped beard and a slow, deliberate way of talking and not much one for a joke, which suited Tom, who wasn't either.

"There's rumours flying as thick as snow-flakes in Beesworthy," said Micah. "Mercy Gollop was never known to tell about her secret affairs to anybody. Took a pleasure in keeping the people guessing what she'd be up to next. I went into 'Fisherman's Arms' for a beer at noon to-day and John Forrester had heard the news and seemed excited about it for some reason."

"Because he'll lose a tidy good customer," I suggested.

"No, Pete, he wasn't cast down. The fact that she'd gone appeared to suit him very well. But we shall soon know the truth without a doubt. I was up over putting the latchet of her gate to rights for her a bit ago, but she didn't converse. Her raven was doing the talking, following her like a dog. A very fine bird, and knowing I'd take out my gun sometimes, she mentioned him and said he could always do with a rabbit. 'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, Miss Gollop, I doubt not he can and I'll remember him.' She hoped I would."

Micah asked me if I meant to go to the funeral and I answered I should do so and take a trophy to put on the coffin.

"It's going to be elm, however," I said. "Dave was quite clear about that."

"What became of your Barnevelder eggs for her birthday?" asked Tom.

"Milly's looking after them to-night, and the lobster too," I told him. "Dave wants to sell it for a museum specimen, which Mr. Townley said was the way you ought to look at Miss Gollop."

We heard a day or two later that the dead couldn't be slipped in with her family as she hoped and her grave was dug with the newcomers in ground down by the bottom hedge. There was a larger company at the burial than you might have expected and I took it for a sign of grace.

"It shows," I said, "that she may have done a kind act now and again and wakened friendly thoughts."

But Dave kept up his unkind opinions of his aunt even after she was in the earth.

"It shows there's always plenty of folk can find time for amusements they need not pay to see," he answered. "They were only there to behold an out-size coffin."

"And Blades will charge according no doubt," said Linda.

I'd stopped with them to see the grave filled in, because the girls wanted me to do so, and they were very grateful for the fine flowers I'd taken. They had made a wreath of the white lilac from "Sunshine Lodge," and I'd got a lot of roses and pinks from home; and Mr. Townley had sent a dashing cross of geraniums, but he was only in the church for the service and hurried away afterwards. There's nothing in my experience looks more utterly miserable than a new-made grave and even Milly and Linda shivered a bit when sexton had slapped up the mound and said that was all for the present. We placed the flowers on it and Linda spoke.

"My first care is going to be to plant black pansy roots here," she told me, "that being her favourite blossom."

There was a famous yew tree of age beyond human memory hard by where they buried Miss Gollop and Milly commented on it.

"That's the owl's yew," she said, "and the churchyard owl hollers there six nights out of seven. That was her favourite noise after her fiddle, so she'll have that too."

"And more music yet," added David. "Sexton says the frogs harbour here a lot of a spring night. They come in scores from the water-table over the hedge and croak on the graves. There's complaints about it from the cottages round about, but none from underground."

He was glad the ceremony had passed off well, but refused, once and for all, to join his sisters in the mourners' pew next Sunday.

Mildred spoke of the service.

"His reverence took it terrible fast," she said, "might have gone a thought slower."

"He didn't miss any—that was to his credit," thought Linda, "and the folk were very nicely spoken after it was over. They didn't pretend anything and Mrs. Manlove hoped we'd be well repaid for all our faithful service."

"The people well understand what you've been to her, Linda," I said. "No woman ever had such nieces before."

It was agreed I should go in the afternoon with them and hear the dispensations. They made a point of it because Mr. Townley had told them I was remembered. It rained at the funeral but not heavy enough to be troublesome and cleared off by noon, and at

three of the clock I met them again by the gate of "Sunshine Lodge" and we went in together. It seemed creepy to know the old lady was sped, but none of them felt it so. The blinds had been drawn after the funeral started, but now Milly pulled them up and asked David whether they were going to have Lawyer Townley in the house-place, or the parlour.

"In the parlour," he said. "The man will expect it."

All old Mercy's chiefest treasures thronged in her parlour. She was a great one for going to sales when they happened within reach of her, and if any joanies or gim-cracks took her fancy, she'd bid for them and buy them cheap, because few cared to bid against her having a feeling they might bring down her wrath upon them if they did. Pictures and china and queer ornaments she'd gather and get pleasure from, like a magpie brightens its nest with any odds and ends he can gather up to put in it.

"Smells mousey," I said to Linda when we went into the room and she told me it always did.

"Along of her passion for keeping the window shut, Pete," she explained. "She'd often set a trap for a mouse in here on 'Satan's' account and never failed to catch one. They are his favourite delicacies."

"Light a spot of fire and open the window and get some air in the place," ordered Dave. "This chamber and everything in it properly reeks of Aunt Mercy—everything to the beastly wall-paper."

The room, so crowded with the things she had bought and hung up and arranged round about, seemed a proper curiosity shop. Shelves she'd got put up to carry her treasures and the mantelshelf was devoted entirely to blue, willow-pattern crockery.

"As for the wall-paper, she took undying pride in it," said Linda. "'Tis a pattern of bats flying across the moon—a most unusual design and she'd never seen the like in any other house but her own."

"Only a female with bats in the belfry would have hung it," declared David. "That's one thing that goes. I won't have no dead hand stretched over me when I come in residence."

"She was most proud of her pictures, I think," I told them. "She took me all round them and let me hear what she'd paid for them. She said pictures always went cheap at sales—especially the melancholy ones, which she preferred herself."

Then Mildred went over them, while Linda took off her hat and jacket and laid a fire.

"That's Admiral Nelson, dying in his last hour of triumph on the *Victory* battleship; and that's Napoleon being took off to his island; and that's Queen Victoria reading the Bible to a shepherd on his

death-bed," said Milly, "and this fearful affair is the execution of King Charles the First, just before he had his beautiful head axed off. Awfulest thing ever done in England by all accounts."

"He asked for it and he got it," so David told us, being not much one for royalties at any time.

"He was a nicer man than Oliver Cromwell, whether or no," I said, remembering the history I'd picked up before my marriage; but David knew no history at all and didn't argue about it.

"I shall sell all these pictures," he announced.

"Not that grand stag staring at us," I advised. "That was always her noblest picture, David. 'The Monarch of the Glen.' "

"Yes," said Dave. "It goes. I'm the monarch of this glen in future."

You couldn't but laugh to picture David a monarch of anywhere.

Linda asked for a match and then wanted something else.

"I was wondering if you'd see your way to letting me have her family Bible, Dave," she said. "Aunt Mercy would open it now and again—not so much for the contents, I'm afraid, as to look at the Gollop family tree and trace out the branches,"

"You can have it, Linda," he promised. "You girls can have everything I leave over that don't mean money.

His sister thanked him and said she'd write off Miss Gollop in the family tree, now she had fallen.

"The fire won't smoke to-day," she foretold, "because the wind's north."

Then a thought struck her.

" 'Satan's' hungry, I expect," she said. "There's half the rabbit left over that I gave him yesterday. His cage is in the shed, David, and you'd best to feed him. The cat's gone."

"Townley's due half-after-four, so I'll smoke a pipe and poke round the grounds," he answered. "I shall plant a few fruit trees next autumn where the flower-beds are—plums most like—and I may set up a flag-post, because a flag looks well flying in a garden."

"There's the raven calling now," said Milly.

"Shall I make Mr. Townley a dish of tea?" asked Linda, but Dave forbade it.

"No," he answered. "Townley's coming on business only. No need to distract his mind with tea. As a matter of fact I took the tea-caddy to Mother Ford yesterday for my own drinking."

Then he marched off.

"High-handed, ain't he?" twittered Linda when his back was turned.

"A bit above himself if you ask me," replied Milly. "I shouldn't

favour living with him. Terrible untidy and none too clean in his habits."

"If he once gives up the shell-fish he'll sweeten off," explained Linda. "But I hope he'll go on working. He's got no gifts away from fishing and, once ashore, he'll spend half his days pub-crawling. You know what that means, Milly. He'd shorten his life."

Milly did a rather shocking thing then. She was above herself also I thought, for the funeral had excited them all, and now she laughed out loud to our surprise.

"What's to laugh at?" asked Linda.

"Just a comical idea," she said. "It don't do to be too hopeful and we've had our graveyard luck, but if Dave was to go first and we came into 'Sunshine Lodge' after all—what a scream!"

Linda joined in her laughter and I could see that both were working up into a high pitch of nerves; which they did do with a very startling result, for now they came across Miss Gollop's fiddle—dumb for ever. Linda picked it up where it was lying on the little sofa.

"I fetched it in here yesterday and my fingers itched to smash it and my feet itched to tramp on it," she said.

"For two pins I would," cried Mildred taking it from her and shaking it, as if she was shaking a living creature, by the throat. "Devil—devil—but it won't come over us no more!"

"How would it be? For revenge—for justice you might say?—But no—we didn't ought," whispered Linda.

"Why not?" asked Milly gripping the instrument and her eyes flashing. "Who's the worse or the wiser? I'd love to! I want to! I will! I'm going to do it, Linda!"

"Don't you let your passions run free, Milly," I urged her, but she wasn't in a temper to take warnings.

"It ain't passion—it's righteous vengeance—payment for untold torments," she hissed out and, to my amazement, her sister backed her up.

"Naked justice—if you put it that way," said Linda, scowling at the fiddle with an expression I had never seen before on her face. The strings twanged under Milly's rough handling as if the poor fiddle was crying for mercy; but it didn't get any.

"Hark to the filthy thing! Look at it grinning in our faces as if it was alive! Would you, you beast?" shouted Milly, and crashed it down on the ground. Then she said she had broke its neck and they screamed with queer, horrid joy. It was a terrible thing to see them both out of hand together and on the edge of hysteria, as if some bad spirit had got in them. Such a sight I never saw before. I cried to

them to be sane, but it was too late. The demented pair were outside control now and they stamped on the fiddle, which made what you might call dying squeals.

"Justice—justice!" screamed Linda. "Conquer him—conquer him, Milly!"

"His perishing yells that was. There! He looks a pretty fool now, don't he?" cried Milly, and the pair of 'em danced a sort of Red Indian war dance on the remains; and then Linda fetched the fiddle bow and snapped it across and danced on that, too.

"You'll get your palpitations, you idiot!" I bawled at Mildred, but she was past hearing—panting with her exertions by now and laughing so shrilly as a neighing horse.

"Matchwood—kindling wood—finished!" she gasped. "That's done me good!"

"Me too—hateful wretch!" gasped Linda, and they tramped till the poor ruin hadn't got a sound splinter left in its body.

"Years of torture! Years of torture paid for at last," gurgled Milly; then she shut up and Linda came to her senses and marked the mess they'd made. Their rash deed lay all over the carpet—a fearful sight—and as they recovered, Milly sat down on an easy chair and spoke as soon as she could.

"Gather him up and feed the fire with him," she told her sister. "Better Dave don't see it yet. Aunt Mercy said her fiddle never smoked. He'll smoke all right now."

They shrieked with senseless laughter again and Linda collected the fragments and piled them on the fire.

"True Gollops we are," said Milly, "though she always told us we were not. That shows what we're made of—the fighting sort!"

She was still off her head and I felt it no use to be angry, nor chide her till the fit was over. But I mourned to think of such a wilful piece of work.

"True Gollops—oh yes," agreed Linda, who'd gone from red to pale again and was wiping the perspiration off her face. "Only true Gollops would have done it. Justice—plain justice. Pick up that bit over there, Pete."

"Aunt Mercy always swore that, when she was took, she'd come back by night and play on her fiddle," said Mildred.

"She won't find it if she do," giggled Linda, and they both cackled again.

We'd made all decent and tidy five minutes later and presently, just before the lawyer was due, David came back laughing and pleased with himself too. He saw they were both tolerable warm and the fire we had built blazed bright.

"Mustn't be too cheerful," he said. "Watch that fire. It's halfway up the chimney."

Then he laughed in a self-satisfied way and I asked him how the garden was.

"What plums do you favour for planting, Dave?" I said.

Then the thing he had been doing came out and we were too astonished to say a word for a minute.

"I've started by planting something else, Pete. I was laughing just now," he said, "because I've killed 'Satan.' Yes—got my revenge at last."

Milly and Linda both stared at him, then both stared at one another and then, after a silence only broken by the crackle of the fiddle's remains, Milly spoke.

"Killed 'Satan!' Never, Dave!"

"All over," he said. "Croaked his last croak. Ate his last rabbit. Insulted me for the last time. I've wrung his neck and buried him under the Brussels sprouts."

He laughed in triumph and showed his teeth, and Linda said, in a queer, awed sort of voice. "We understand that, don't we Milly?"

"True Gollop that was," answered her sister. "Self-respect is everything."

"Right," he agreed, "and I've got it back at last. And if I'd met him, I'd have served 'Arthur' the same. Vermin—that's what they were."

"You needn't trouble for him," explained Milly, "'Arthur's' gone. When he found Aunt Mercy was off the map he settled down for good with Mrs. Butters and I've told her she can keep him."

David went on about the poor raven as if he was a hero to have slain it.

"I've long had the will to finish that damned bird," he said, "and only waited for the power."

I had it on the tip of my tongue to tell him that he was a dirty, mean coward and I'd never speak to him again; but then I felt a creepy feeling that his feeble mind had worked like his sisters'. They had all been smouldering for years under fancied persecution and let a fiddle and a bird win hate that no reasoning creature would give to any but another reasoning creature. In a way I felt frightened of them for a minute; but I kept shut and wished the lawyer would turn up.

Then Mildred mentioned him.

"And don't you be too easy with Townley, David," she said. "Remember he called Aunt Mercy a 'museum specimen,' and he

called Linda 'my dear.' We don't want no patronage from him. You are his employer now and see he don't put on any frills."

"Fear nothing as to that," he answered. "I'll learn him his position double quick if he doesn't know it."

"His father was only a shop-keeper at Kingsbridge," went on Milly. "He rose to be a lawyer, granted; but we go back a long sight further than he does."

"Them as pay the piper call the tune," answered David, and then we heard Mr. Townley's bicycle bell and David went to greet him.

When he was out of the room, Milly spoke again.

"Don't say a word as to the fiddle if it enters into the conversation, either of you," she said, and Linda showed her spirit was changed over that ugly business.

"Not me, Milly. I almost wish now we'd put a curb on and never done it," she half whispered. "Now I'm cool, I'm sorry. We let our passions run too high."

But Milly was not sorry at all.

"No such thing and don't be a fool," she barked out—almost as Miss Gollop used to bark.

And then her brother fetched in Mr. Townley. He'd put on his black for the funeral, but changed into his tweed knickerbockers again now. He carried a leather case for his papers and greeted us kindly.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said. "All my sympathy. You stood up to your ordeal with great courage, I'm sure."

"Us Gollops can stand up to anything," replied Milly—in a rather shaken voice all the same, because the sudden and cruel end of "Satan" had been a startler for both of them.

"I saw you at church, Mr. Townley," I said.

"Yes, Pete. I attended the service, but had to hurry away afterwards and couldn't go to the grave-side," he explained.

"Will you please to take this arm-chair by the fire," suggested Linda; but he wouldn't do that.

"What a blaze for a June day!" he said. "No, no, I'll sit by the window."

Then Milly nearly let the cat out of the bag, but saved herself in time.

"It was the old fid——" she began, then cleared her throat. "Some sticks I threw on to clean the stuffy air," she went on. "There's always a smell of toad-stools in this chamber—couldn't tell you for why."

Mr. Townley looked round at the curiosities.

"Your aunt thought the world of her parlour," he reminded them.

"Liked the house-place best to live in, but always delighted to show me round this room and point out her bargains. My! What a collection it is."

"It was her pleasure to swoop off to a sale and pick up something new—mostly junk," said David; but the lawyer warned him.

"Some of that old blue china on the mantelpiece may represent quite good money, Dave," he pointed out. "People who understand will pay well if it's the real thing. Don't give them away."

David grinned at the suggestion.

"I'm giving nothing away," he replied. "Be just to yourself before you're generous to other people."

Mr. Townley looked at him as if he didn't like him.

"I see," was all he said, then changed the subject.

"I'll sit here beside the window. Nice view and a glimpse of Start Point. Now then—here we are," he began. Then he opened his case and fetched out a lot of papers.

"Everything in her own hand. Satisfy yourselves as to that," he said, then spread the documents on a little table he'd drawn to him, while the Gollops went over to look at them.

"That's her writing—to call it writing," admitted David.

"Aunt Mercy's scrawl sure enough, Mr. Townley," agreed Mildred.

"A lavish caligraphy, but perfectly legible and absolutely clear as to meaning and intention," he told them. "You three, sole remaining relatives may regard yourselves as the deceased's lawful residuary legatees with precisely similar claims upon the estate. But the fate of residuary legatees can be disappointing sometimes when there is no residuum."

They'd taken seats round him and now David jumped out of his as though he was shot.

"No residuum! No residuum!" he shouted. "What are you talking about?"

"Lor, Mr. Townley!" said Mildred; then he reproved her brother.

"Mend your manners, Gollop," he ordered sternly, "and don't bawl at me. I didn't say there was no residuum. I merely told you that it can be disappointing when there is none. You are faced with a residuum, but not with her total estate as you anticipated."

"And why not her total estate?" asked David, who had got pretty edgey by now.

"For the reason that she disposed of most of it during her lifetime."

David had risen and still kept his feet.

"Mr. Townley," he said, "before this hand I'll take my oath she

told me she was worth five thousand pounds. She'd got that money stored up."

"When did she tell you that?" asked the lawyer.

"Years and years ago; and the money ought to have goodied a lot since then."

"What she told you was probably true enough when she said so," answered Mr. Townley, "but it is not true to-day, for a very sufficient reason, my friend. Don't be entirely downcast: I'm not suggesting you're forgotten and will not have something to be glad about; but nothing like thousands of pounds. There is no question of 'Sunshine Lodge' either. You can check all I have to tell you and satisfy yourselves as to the truth. First the money. Ten years ago now—when she was seventy-four years old, Miss Gollop bought an annuity."

"What about us—her lawful heir and heiresses?" asked David, and the lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"I must be frank," he said. "When she mentioned you people—very seldom—it was with distaste. At any rate your existence did not deter her from purchasing an annuity for which she paid five thousand and five hundred pounds. At her advanced age that simplified life, saved her trouble, banished any further anxiety as to what to do with her money and left her plenty of income."

"Be that as it may," said David, "she couldn't play no tricks with this house, and she couldn't take it with her."

"She couldn't blew the house and grounds, Mr. Townley," suggested Linda.

"She could, and she did, my dear," replied Townley in his fatherly way.

"Blew the house and grounds!" echoed Mildred.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. That was a long time ago. She decided, at her age, she might just as well knock the full value out of her property. That was her own expression. And she set about to do it in her own way."

"She might have left us to decide what we wanted and what we didn't want," sighed Linda.

"She might, but you see you don't enter into her main plans," explained Mr. Townley, "except in connection with other lives, for which she cared far more than for any of you. Granted her attitude may appear unseemly and unusual. Indeed I pointed that out; but she stuck to her intentions and they indirectly embraced you all. Everything is there for you to read, mark and digest."

They made no answer to this and he spoke again.

"Your aunt was what you call an 'Individualist,' and she gratified her own wishes without considering what others might think, or feel,

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

OUR postmaster, Barnaby Blanchard, it was—my eldest brother's son—who brought the wild notion to my notice.

"Lor, Nephew!" I said, "what a fantastic thought, my dear!"

Barnaby was a nice man and a bit of a scholar, like his grandfather before him. His mother, Grace Blanchard, lived still and continued to be a dear friend of mine. I'd held her hand when Barnaby was being born, for she would not let me out of her sight and Doctor Meadows bade me stop and support her. And her first man-child in fullness of time did well at his schooling and though, of course, ordained to follow his father, Aaron Blanchard, at Birch Hanger Farm, and inherit the land handed down through three generations of the race, yet, when the challenge came so to do, turned against any such prospect, for there was not a mite of farming in his nature. He inclined to black-coated work, so he went into the Postal Service and, when he was over forty, became appointed to be post-master of our village and felt satisfied to conduct that task. He ran it with a shop, naturally, because in a little place like Beesworthy there was never enough doing at the post-office for an ambitious man like Barnaby. He called his business a "general store," and didn't much like the people to speak of a "shop-of-all-sorts," but I never knew why it sounded distasteful on his ear.

Of course all our family patronized Barnaby, who was held to have done well and carried on the name of Blanchard with credit.

I'd gone in for a penny stamp and he gave me one of my favourite boiled sweets off the ration. Then we fell into talk about my past.

"I often wish, Aunt Pete," he said, "that you would turn to a task well within your powers and also beyond the powers of any but yourself to perform. With your energy and good education and cleverness at letter writing, why shouldn't you occupy an hour or two every day and set down the course of your long life? You've got every needful gift for the job and the most needful of all—a wondrous memory. We often marvel in the family what a storehouse of memories you are and how clear you can see the past long before our generation was born.

"Once you turn your mind to it," he went on, while I sucked my sweet and listened, "the past would unfold before you and all the

events would take their turn in proper order same as in one of those panoramas we used to see when we were children."

"I remember them well," I told him. "Most wonderful journeys you could take in those moving pictures. That was fifty or sixty years and more before what we call 'moving pictures' now were invented. You'd start off in a ship and go on your voyage and see the wonders of ocean and foreign lands and strange people and go round the world, all in a couple of hours. But panoramas are things of the past now, Barnaby. Boys and girls to-day wouldn't have the patience to sit and see 'em."

"A very fine panorama you could make out of your own life notwithstanding," he assured me. "It's in your power to bring back all manner of unremembered events and bygone people who will be forgot for ever if you don't set them down. A chance to say kind things of the dead."

"Well I never!" I said. "What a parlous task you'd set upon me, Barnaby. But I don't know of so much worth telling as you fancy. There's a lot better forgot than remembered in every long life. If I launched out on such an adventure as that, I'd be most like to take the bright side and dwell on the happy spots, because my memory, good though it may be, would never linger much with the bad ones."

"You're built that way no doubt," he admitted, "and always lean to the hopeful side. Life, as I see it, runs in a pattern and the design is woven in the fabric, and for such as you, the high-lights would stand out clearer than the dark."

"By the will of God that's so, Barnaby," I agreed, "and a very orderly thing; but when you say I might set down all my eighty years and more, you have got to consider the nature of such a tale. Who would gain? There's one or two I grant might treasure what was there—yourself among 'em and also my foster-daughter. She, of all others, would set store upon it. But there wouldn't be anything of interest to anybody else, because my life has jogged along, much like the lives of a thousand old women, with the happiness remembered and the sorrow not forgot."

"There's dark items in the pattern no doubt," he said. "You can't be an octogenarian and not run into a bit of woe now and again; but often our sad experiences may attract other people a good deal more than our joyful ones. Catastrophes are news. And most certainly you can't pretend that your life has been commonplace. There's nothing commonplace about you. There was your escape from death before you married to begin with."

Then, seeing me hesitate, he ran on and showed he had thought

about such a thing before speaking, which was his custom, being a cautious man.

"I believe you might well find it an easier bit of work than you think for," he said. "As I see it, Aunt Pete, you can look upon the task as divided into three natural partitions."

"How so?" I asked and he made it clear and showed himself to be in the right.

"First," he said, "there is my Uncle Thomas Appleby and his day and all that happened in it; then you'd find yourself up against dear Uncle Micah, and lastly, there must rise up Uncle John and you'll be called to deal with him."

"Fairly," I bargained. "If such a thing was to happen, I should deal fairly by your Uncle John."

"You will deal fairly by all that comes to your memory no doubt," he agreed.

"I've never spoke my full mind touching John because under no compulsion to do so," I told him. "And people respect my silence on that subject. But busy ones, thinking to please me, had a lot to say about him—very hard things. You need to consider his actions without bias."

Barnaby Blanchard lifted his eyebrows and pursed his mouth.

"Very large-minded I'm sure," he answered. "Just what one might expect from you, and no doubt, if you set to work, you'll throw light on a good few other people badly in need of white-washing. That's your humanity; but you mustn't overdo it."

"There's more grey than black or yet white," I told him. "I'd go so far as to say I've never met man or woman in my life who was all saint or sinner. Just good and bad mixed in different proportions, and you admire 'em, or hate 'em according to your own standards of good or bad, which incline you for or against 'em. But your own standards are just as like to be mistaken as any other body's standards."

"Very large-minded, Aunt Pete," he said again, and then customers came into his store and I took my stamp and sailed off.

CHAPTER II

NEPHEW BARNABY'S suggestion, that I should set down chapter and verse of my long story made no very deep appeal to me for a time; but, thinking it over, I remembered there was one dear creature who would welcome such an effort with a full heart and cherish it vigorously enough. I would sooner please her than any

later, I bought the materials: a packet of ruled paper, some pen-nibs which I favour, sharp and hard, and a bottle of grass-green ink, which is restful to the eyes. Off my nephew himself I bought the lot and, of course, he knew what I was after and wished me luck and wouldn't take a penny for the goods.

"If ill befalls me 'tis your doing," I said, "and you will be accountable for it; but if my good angel holds the pen, then all may yet be well."

"You never had a bad angel overshadowing you," he answered; and, ere long I got down to work and found the task calling for a dictionary from the start, because, if you commit yourself to writing, the written word demands you spell it properly. Speech glides off the tongue easy as running water and gone so soon as said, but once you set it on paper, there it stands to shout your ignorance if put down wrong. And much else beside confronts you when you gaze, pen in hand, at a virgin sheet of paper. There's living people as well as the bygone ones who may clamour to be told about and, in that case, you need to watch your penmanship very close. However I saw no perils there, for if you can't say anything good, what easier than to say nothing at all? In telling of the dead also you need to bear in mind that departed men and women cannot answer back and seldom leave behind anybody who would think it worth while to try, so in their case, if you don't know the whole truth, it's better manners to leave them alone.

CHAPTER III

My father, Moses Blanchard, farmed Birch Hanger of old, and six children he had by Susan Blanchard, his wife, who was a Westaway. Mother, having borne four babes—two boys and two girls—rested awhile, then hit on something to give variety to her family and had twins in the shape of me, Petronella, and my brother, Herbert. There was a good gap between us and our elders and we got very friendly together and made our own games and should have been lifelong friends no doubt but for the sad fact that Bert's thread got cut untimely when he was fifteen.

Father used to say that you must serve boys and maids, if they are good, same as you serve good dogs and cats. You pat the dogs and you stroke the cats and, being greatly inclined to Bert and myself and prone to overvalue us, he patted Bert and stroked me whether we were good or naughty. A kind father and he praised me very

hearty when I took over our poultry at fifteen years old and said I had the making of a clever hen-wife; and he patted Bert into the Royal Navy when he joined a training-ship at Devonport and saw no reason why he shouldn't be a sailor. Then, after my twin brother lost his life by an accident in a ship's boat, and was drowned along with three other boys, father took it very hard and I wept bitter tears and my light went out for a month of Sundays, because I felt to have lost the better half of my own self. Father understood my grief very well and he bought me a nice lot of Buff Orpington poultry to distract my mind from poor Bert. Which, in course of time, they succeeded in doing. Our 'Buffs' were famous round about presently and took prizes in open competition. But mother, though proud of Bert and me, and bitterly sorry to lose him, was always more addicted to my eldest sister, Primrose, and at the time when my little brother passed out, Primrose was tokened to Nicholas Ashbury of Liverpool, and the date of their wedding already fixed. So mother, concentrating on that, wasn't so much overwhelmed by Bert's death as father and me.

Our family now consisted of our parents, Aaron, my eldest brother, James the next, Primrose, Phyllis and myself. About then I first began to find Thomas Appleby in my thoughts. Birch Hanger stood inland from Beesworthy, but our fields ran to the low cliff edge only half a mile north of the village and our orchard came up to the churchyard walls on the east. As children Bert and I oft went down a little goyle that gave on the beach and our friends were the longshore fishermen who made their living round about. We'd run errands for 'em and help to pull in the boats and they would be kind to us and sometimes let us go out with them when they went to pull up their pots. And among them was Thomas Appleby, a busy, hard-working young man, very keen on his business and very clever at it. He followed his father and worked for him afloat, while old Mr. Matthew Appleby did the vending ashore, having a good name for nothing but the best. He was a great friend of my father and I came acquaint with his son and felt rather proud of it, him being twenty at the time and a big noise among the other fellows. Tom favoured me and would let me go out with him to the pots and even take me fishing under sail now and again when the mackerel were plentiful. And that was a great feather in my cap, because he never let any other girl do such a thing. But he had a weak spot for me from the first and long after, when we fell in love, he confessed to me that he had liked my passion for going out fishing and my handiness to learn what he taught me and my quickness to get seaworthy and be useful in a boat. "Even then, before your hair went up and your petticoats came down to your boots," he said, "I'd got a feeling you might be the girl for

ne." But my suspicions that he might be the man for me didn't dawn till a bit later. That he was presently going to fall in love with me never occurred to me till long after. My father knew old Mr. Appleby very well and they'd drink tea together sometimes of a Sunday; and then—on one of these occasions, after Primrose's marriage—the old fisherman brought Tom to tea with him and I had the pleasure of showing the young man how clever I was by now with our poultry and the beautiful Buff Orpingtons father had given me. He was very interested in the farm, however, and he and my eldest brother, Aaron, who would succeed at Birch Hanger, soon left us and went to look at stock and so on. But from that time forward Tom generally turned up too when his father came, and he didn't arrive to see my brother, but to get in a word with me. 'Twas then, after I stood in sight of my seventeenth birthday, that mother found how the land lay and called my attention to it.

"Pete," she said, that being the name I always went by, "what price Tom Appleby?"

My mother was a woman who never chattered and father often used to say about her that she showed what a darned lot of conversation was needless and only waste of wind-power, though ever a great talker himself.

"I didn't know there was a price put upon Tom Appleby, Mother," I said, "but I've found he's very addicted to me and I like him very well indeed. He's always clean in his person and he's mighty strong and never swears."

"I've no quarrel with him," she answered. "He's trustable and he's got his father's religious opinions and Matthew's money behind him in the future. But red hair often goes with a short temper. He's high spirited and so are you; but love must be a game of give and take if it's going to be enjoyed by both the players."

I thought upon this, because I had the fierceness of youth in my nature in those days, like most other young things if they are healthy, but it hadn't landed me in any trouble to name so far, and never with Tom Appleby.

"We have not had a quarrel yet," I told mother, "and his red hair's the making of him in my opinion. I can't picture him just commonplace, with brown hair, or mousey hair, same as most men."

"He's ambitious," my mother warned me, "and ambitious men seldom have much time to spare on their partners."

"I shouldn't be feared of his ambitions, for I know 'em and there's none that would be likely to get him into trouble," I said.

My mother agreed.

"I grant you that. He comes of very fine stock and his father

carried on the good work his mother began. Matthew was never ambitious but always a great thinker."

"I like old Mr. Appleby very much," I told her. "And he's got a very favourable view of me, owing to me being my father's daughter, because father is his best friend."

My mother nodded.

"That's so," she said. "You being the apple of dad's eye, he'll hate for you to leave home, but since you wouldn't be going out of Beesworthy and always at his beck, he'll get tempered to the thought before it happens."

Up to now I'd kept Tom on tenterhooks, because he'd offered for me—on a day when I went out with him to catch dabs—and he'd anchored his boat two mile or more from shore and set down his lines and we were waiting for the dabs to get feeding. And while we waited, he passed the time by unfolding his feelings and saying how I was getting on his nerves above a bit and he'd thank me to say how he struck me as a husband and whether I thought he was good enough to take for keeps in a year's time, or thereabout.

"You may say, Pete, that we've been keeping company in a manner of speaking for a good bit now," he began, "and, when I first let you in my boat, nobody could have felt more surprised at such a weakness than myself; but that was the thin edge of the wedge no doubt, and from that time onwards, you took my fancy more and more. Now I love you tremendous and believe you'd be no hindrance to my future but quite the contrary, because you've got brains and pluck and love the sea and wouldn't be feared of taking a sailor."

"I've caught a dab," I said. "Wait a minute, Tom."

That gave me time and, after I'd drawn up the fish and took him off his hook and baited again and let the line sink to the bottom, I answered him. Meanwhile he waited quite quiet for me to speak.

"Of course I care a lot for you," I began. "You've been uncommon nice to me and I was very proud when you let me go out in your boat—a thing you never granted to more than two boys before, let alone a girl. And I agree with you that I should be no hindrance to your future, but far from it, because I've always been well known to have my wits about me, and my father would tell you the same. I like your manners and customs, Tom, and, now I know you properly love me, I shall look at you with other eyes and find what it does to me to hear you want me so much."

That was the way I talked when I was seventeen.

"All right," he said. "I'll give you six weeks to make up your mind and I hope it will be favourable."

"It won't take so long as that," I answered, because his voice had

gone rather flat when he heard I wanted time. In sober truth I thought the world of him and loved him quite as much as he loved me, but at seventeen you've got your airs and graces still and like to feel fancy free.

We left it so and talked about the price of dabs in the market and I praised his father's salesmanship and so on, and when we'd put in two hours and caught some nice heavy flat fish and an outstanding plaice among them he drew up the anchor, hoisted his sail and came in. I'd learned to steer by now and he said I did it in a very understanding manner.

"It's a lucky thing," I said, "that both father and mother like a fresh dab and can always count upon one when I've been out with you."

But that didn't interest him.

"To return to you for half a minute," he said after we'd landed and he was stringing the best of our catch for me to take home—"To return to you, Pete, my father spoke a clever thing but two nights since. He thinks very high of you and he said it's more than a thousand pities a girl with such a quick brain as what you have, don't give a little time to educate yourself higher than you have reached yet. He's a great one for education as you know, and in his opinion, if you could make time for some lessons in various subjects, it would be a tower of strength to your future. You're more than clever enough for me as you stand, but he feels that knowledge adds to sense and makes for happiness. 'There's nothing so interesting as knowledge,' he told me, 'and if Petronella's got an inquiring mind, she'll be a wise girl to go to the night school at Kingsbridge.' 'It's an idea,' I told father, 'and very like, if she can make the time, she'll fall in with it, being so clever as she is already.'"

"I've thought of it myself," I said. "I'd like to be much cleverer than I am, Tom."

My parents supported this idea, and, with the summer and daylight evenings, I went three nights a week to a school they'd got in our market-town, but a few miles from Beesworthy. And that's how I came by my scholarship, such as it is, and learned to handle a pen and get a smattering of information to make me usefuller. And, looking ahead, I took some pains to grow better acquaint with the ways of figures, for, though bright as a button in other directions, Tom was a very poor hand with them. Meanwhile, I'd made up my mind that I loved him quite well enough to marry him, and, in the upshot, I didn't keep the patient man waiting above a fortnight. It was during that time I had a talk with my parents and found both well disposed to the match. But father bargained for a year to pass

before it happened and bade Tom seek a home worthy of me and convenient for his work. There were some nice brick cottages building at Beesworthy just then, not a mile from Birch Hanger and but a quarter of a mile from the Strand, so, when we were tokened, I mentioned the matter.

"Father's very wishful for us to start life in a good manner of house," I told Tom, "and reckons it would be a clever thing if you put yourself down for one of the new six-roomed houses that Fred Masterman's building; because there you'd be near your work and I wouldn't be too far off from the farm."

"Then I'll see Masterman and get on with it and watch over the building when I'm ashore," he promised.

He was very happy that evening and took a most smiling view of his future along with me.

"You know me for a masterful man," he said, "and I know you for a strong-minded piece. We have got wills of our own—both of us—and none the worse for that."

"We have got a grand will towards each other, which is the great thing," I told him, "and it's no odds if we differ in small things if we never differ about each other."

So he kissed me yet again and, after supper, came up to Birch Hanger and had a talk with father and mother. And they received him as my intended and didn't see any reason why we shouldn't make a good job of it. After that I pushed on with my lessons, and it was known we were keeping company and Tom brought me a tokening ring when he was next in Dartmouth, and it had a proper precious stone in it and cost him two pounds and five shillings.

So we fell in step, saw as much of each other as possible and looked forward to the future. There were breezes, of course, as we got to know each other better; but in truth they amounted to little, because in great things we always saw alike and, where we didn't, the upshot was so trifling that we often laughed at ourselves afterwards for being pig-headed about nothing at all.

Then, with the roof on our house and all going well, the first proper adventure of my life came down upon me like a thunderclap and taught me a mighty lot more than I'd got at my schooling, and learned Tom much more than he'd gleaned as a longshore fisherman. In fact things happened that went so far as to aim, not only at our hopes for the future, but our lives in the present and, though it sounds impossible that such a coil could have overtook the pair of us, yet so it did and we faced no less than death. While, as if that weren't fearful enough in its naked self, a horror more dread yet looked out from behind it and threw a light upon our characters that made us

both properly ashamed. In fact, you might say neither Tom nor I was ever quite the same again. Up till then we were on very good terms indeed with our characters. He prided himself on his skill in his business and understanding of the sea and his great strength and high principles, while I, finding how much and how quick I was learning, and how I could cope with the rules of arithmetic and so on, began to think I was a girl a bit out of the common and doubtless give myself a lot of airs in consequence. All the time our pride was riding for a fall and, when the crash came, it took a terrible ugly shape and knocked the stuffing out of us to a pitiful extent.

Lots of happiness we had before the blow fell, for I properly loved the sea in those days and liked nothing better than to be on it with Tom at all hours and in all weathers.

"I wish I'd been a boy, then I'd have gone for a sailor long ago, like my little brother, Bert," I told him once; and he granted I'd got the sea in my blood and might have made a good seaman.

"But, thank God, you wasn't a boy all the same," he said, "for you've got the promise of being a very useful girl."

I'd poke fun at him sometimes, because caution was his second name, but when I told him he was feared of the sea, though he lived by it, he answered that he was feared of naught on sea or land, but he knew the sea and I didn't, and I'd soon learn to fear it all right if I knew it as well as he did."

"It's a case of ignorance is bliss with you, Pete," he said. "You think the sea's a good-tempered old monster and wouldn't hurt a fly; but that's because you've always got me along with you when you're on it."

He wondered in secret at my cocksureness and how I couldn't feel any sense of danger, and once he took me out in a capful of wind and thought to see me show a white feather when his boat shipped a tidy wave; but the only white feather was on the sea itself and I laughed and said I wasn't feared of a pail of water and helped him to bale, so he didn't get any change out of me that time.

The whole holiday I'd fixed my mind on wasn't a public one, but autumn fair day at Kingsbridge, and father was showing our famous white bull, 'Turk II,' and counting to get first prize with it. But I didn't care about that and Tom had promised to pleasure me and take me fishing. I was working very hard now and, what with my poultry and my lessons, I felt a whole day for pleasure would be a great treat. I built up my hopes a lot looking forward to it, and so did Tom; but he wasn't so keen for the fishing as I was, that being his daily bread and no holiday. He'd have better liked to stop ashore

and go to the fair; and the evening before, he came up to smoke a pipe with father and asked me to change my mind.

"Give the sea a miss to-morrow, Pete," he said, "and come to the fair, and I'll pay for a good fairing and you'll see your dad's famous bull take first prize."

"That's what I want her to do," said my father. "'Tis an interesting thing, Tom, that only my head man, Jonas, and Pete herself can handle 'Turk II.' He'll come like a lamb to her and she's known him since he was calved; but I wouldn't trust another save Jonas, or her, with him for an instant. A tricky mind the creature's got and I often wish I could read it."

"I lay he's all right if you don't show fear of him," said Tom. "Creature's soon know if they've met their masters."

I laughed at him.

"That's what I tell you about the sea," I said. "The sea's all right if you're not 'feared of it; and I'm going fishing to-morrow, Tom, and nowhere else. I've set my heart and been counting the days. And I've planned a proper dinner, all packed, and one of those pasties mother makes that you love. It's going to be a beautiful holiday."

"Have your way," said my sweetheart, "and when I quit the sea some day and own big boats and employ lesser men to sail in them, what will you do then?"

"Make love to them and get 'em to let me go trawling in mid-channel sometimes," I answered. "It's life to me to be on deep water and I'd dearly love to sail clean out of sight of everything but the sea itself some day."

CHAPTER IV

I WAS on the beach fine and early next morning after I tended my fowls, and I carried a brave basket of food and a bottle of beer for Tom and a bottle of lemonade for myself. The weather looked hopeful enough to me because, though the reds had been in the sky at dawn, which is a bad sign, there wasn't a lot of wind blowing and that off-shore, so the sea ran smooth enough. But I found Tom in no holiday humour. He was clever about weather and said the wind looked to be backing against the sun and the glass had fallen in the night. We got the boat down for launching and another man, going out to his pots off Surf Rocks, helped us. He didn't like the weather neither.

"Wind's going back," he said, "and freshening."

"What of it, Dave?" I asked, the man being David Gollop, a longshore fisher of no account, though his family had stood high in the parish once.

"There's going to be a bit of a blow presently," he said.

"Let it blow, then," I said. "I wonder some of you men are brave enough to go out to your lobster pots sometimes."

Tom thanked Gollop for lending us a hand and then pushed off and ran up his sail

"I'll try for a late mackerel or two, then be back before sea gets up," he said, but that wasn't my idea at all. We slipped away and I made ready a couple of lines and cheered him up with my own high spirits. The sun had risen, though not as if he was going to enjoy the day. A bit sulky he looked as the clouds gained upon him. The wind was shifting, but Tom lighted his pipe and I took the helm and we carried on for best part of an hour. Then, finding the mackerel weren't there and nothing doing, I said we'd go out to the dab grounds, farther to sea, and cast anchor and get a bit of our own back. He argued against, so we ran out a short half-mile and anchored, but not on the proper place for dabs in my opinion. However he was firm and said he had no mind to go farther to sea and wasn't going to do it.

"We'll fish for half an hour or thereabout," he said, "then I'm going in. Sorry, Pete, but the sea's rising ashore and we'll have our holiday when we get back."

I felt a cloud over us by now and much disappointment that my hopes of a long spell afloat looked like being cut short; but then things brightened a bit, for though the sea was beginning to run and white horses flickering on the waves, fishing turned to a proper wonder and the dabs couldn't come in quick enough. Even Tom forgot for a bit and the sport was so good that he said we must take our bearings and remember where we'd anchored.

"Shows how you learn something every day," he said.

I was very excited to pull in real big fish in this way and didn't notice the weather. The wind was beginning to offer rain from the south by now and the sky darker, so Tom warned me we must up lines and run home. But we didn't lie more than three parts of a mile off shore and I felt quite all right, though there was a good bit of a lop on the boat by now. Then a wave lipped over and he said we must be off and sharp about it.

"Cruel sorry, Pete," he said, "but it's going to blow darned hard in half an hour and there's a tidy sea running on the beach already."

Yet, in my wilful foolery, I wouldn't hear of it.

"'Tis the day of my life, Tom," I cried, "and I won't miss a minute and I ain't going to stop for a puff of wind, nor yet a bucket of rain. Look at that fish!"

I'd fetched up a two-pound dab as I spoke—a most wonderful specimen.

Then Tom grew short and our terrible flare-up started.

"It may be the day of your life," he said, "but you don't want for it to be the last, do you? It's going to take twenty minutes in this boat to make shore and we ought to have gone an hour ago."

"Just five minutes more if you're frightened," I said. "And I never thought you was a coward."

This angered him as well it might, but he'd been caught napping a bit himself by the wondrous fishing and, though he lost his temper, he well knew it was no time to lose it. His proper seaman's instincts woke in him and he acted.

"Draw up," he said. "There's a sea running on the beach and the sooner we're over it the better for my boat."

And I got angry, and all the angrier no doubt because he kept so calm. I said sharp things and sulked, like the fool I was, and then, going forward to get the anchor, he pushed me out of his way and I fell and sat down on a mass of dabs and was too astounded to speak another word, but just squatted and stared at him with my hair blowing over my face and all my handiness gone out of me. The wind was freshening by leaps and bounds and sea-horses whitening the wave-tops, so Tom, finding the anchor wouldn't come easy, whipped out his knife and cut the rope. Then he hoisted our little jib, but didn't put up a rag of the lug-sail and went to the tiller and ran for it. But never a word he said to me and I kept my mouth shut too and got up off the dabs and wound in the lines.

The boat, *Morning Star* she was called, seemed a parlous long time getting her way on and I wondered why the waves was passing under us instead of carrying us along with them, but presently she got going with the wind harder every minute and the sea running high enough to poop us if one came over. Then I could see the waves on the beach and felt our danger for the first time. I knew what he meant now and saw men running about on the Strand and shouting because they knew what we had let ourselves in for. A big surf rolled between us and the beach and what had looked but a harmless thread of white water from our anchorage was a very different sight now as we came wallowing near to it. We'd took in a lot of water already and I started to bail and heave some of the fish out of her. But never a word Tom spoke. His teeth were set and he stuck to the tiller with his eyes ahead.

I made pretence to be fearless and talked a lot different from what I felt.

"My!" I shouted to make myself heard in the noise. "It looks as if we were going to get wet before we get ashore, Tom!"

And I smiled to show my temper was sped. He cast one look at me, but didn't smile back and I never saw his face so grim before.

"It looks as if we was going to get drowned afore we get ashore," he answered, his eyes on the sea, "and serve you damned well right if we are."

I'd never heard him swear before and I didn't make no answer, and the next thing was we heaved up on a huge wave as though it was going to carry us with it into the broken water; but it passed ahead and we hadn't got there yet. It lifted us like a cork and rolled on. I feared he'd need to tack and reckoned it couldn't be done if we wasn't to get broadside on to the sea and be wrecked. It was only a matter of minutes now and I felt the might of the ocean and the weakness of man for the first time in my life. I watched the seas and wondered which was going to topple aboard and sink us and thought how different a flurry on the water looked from shore to what it does when you hap to be in it. But, strange and shameful to tell, even the mess we were in didn't bulk so large in my fool's mind as the insult my intended had put upon me and I hated him good and hearty and ordained I'd throw him over presently, if I lived to do so. He altered course a trifle with no hurt and it looked healthier I thought and safety a bit nearer; but then our jib got more wind than it could hold and was blown clean away. The ropes parted and there was a crack like a pistol-shot and the sail went up in the air and flew ashore far over the Strand like a great bird, and I wished we could have gone with it. But life was out of the *Morning Star* and she lost way and just lumbered at the will of the waves and drifted with the surf that waited to sink her. The din was such that we couldn't have heard ourselves speak if we had wanted to, but Tom knew we were for it now and he dropped the helm and took off his jacket and his sea-boots and stood up holding to the mast and signalled me to go forward. The boat was water-logged and bailing vain, but, though a wreck, she floated into the white water and held together till we reached within a hundred yards or less of the shore and could see men with ropes making ready to do something about it when we got near enough if ever we did. Then came the finish and a roller twisted us round like a straw though we floated yet and didn't touch bottom for a little longer. All I remember after that was Tom making a grab at me with the intention to save me, though his last words had been that I deserved to drown; but a cross wave knocked

him over and, when I came up to the surface again, I'd lost sight of him and was trying to swim till I could touch bottom and get saved by the men ashore. I saw them close now and ropes flying, and one man coming towards me up to his breast in the surf and then a wave washed me heels over head and I remembered no more till I came to my senses on the beach. It was David Gollop who had come out with a rope tied to him and got to me and grabbed me and lifted my head above the water. Then he and I were dragged ashore like a sack of potatoes; meanwhile Tom was saved likewise and made a better landing than what I had. The *Morning Star* had come in bottom up by now and, when he saw I wasn't drowned, he set to work with a lot to help him save what he might. His boat had stove in, but they dragged her up after a bit. I mind coming to and laughing at an old man who was watching over me. He said all was well and a lad had run for Doctor Meadows and hoped to find him at home; but I didn't want a doctor. I was sick and rid myself of a lot of sea-water and then I stood up and told the old chap there were enough dabs on the beach to feed all Beesworthy. I didn't go till I'd got two dabs from the beach and thanked Dave Gollop for saving me, and then I bolted home.

"Looking back," I said to father when he returned from the farm, "you might go so far as to say I was to blame more than him, but nothing could excuse a man for saying his lover deserved to drown and I haven't forgiven him by a long shot, if ever I shall."

Father was on my side, of course, and hadn't a good word for Tom just then.

"He ought to have set his foot down and refused to go," he said. "He should have been stern as a rock not to run you in danger, it's hard to forgive him for that. Meantime you're saved alive, which is all that matters to me and your mother."

Oceans of rain fell as the day passed noon, a proper cloud of darkness settled on the sea and a rare fierce blow brought in autumn; but our white bull got first prize before Kingsbridge Fair was drowned out and father praised God for all his blessings when he went to bed that night. We expected Tom would show up next day, but he didn't, though we heard from a fisherman, who called after breakfast, that the *Morning Star* was done for and good for fire-wood and no more. But the man—David Gollop it was—didn't know a thing about my sweetheart so I resolved to go down and ask after him and tell him I'd resolved already for him to have all my private savings towards a new boat.

The reason why Gollop had been in such a hurry to come to Birch Hanger was me. He reckoned that he had saved my life at danger

to his own and counted my father would haste to reward him richly while the affair was still hot in his mind. David was well known for a man who set hard cash above salvation—an unfortunate weakness in his case, because hard cash was always bound to be terrible short for anybody with such poor earning powers. The Gollop race had been big people in Beesworthy long ago. In the churchyard there was a row of them going back before Queen Victoria's days, and Birch Hanger itself had once belonged to the head of the family, who sold it to my own grandfather long years ago. And that was the last Gollop to have money and dominion over land. There were only four Gollops left now in Beesworthy: David and his two sisters and their Aunt, Miss Mercy Gollop—a parlous, maiden woman of whom her nephew and her nieces went in fear. But all three clove to her very faithful and obeyed her orders, because she was the promised land to them, having money and a house and garden of her own. So, as she was mighty old, they counted to inherit the lot, which would be the only hope for any of them when they grew old themselves.

David's sisters were Mildred and Ethelinda, but folk always called the younger just "Linda," that being quite enough of a name for a little go-by-the-ground woman like her. She was a gentle, kindly creature and a great friend of mine—my first woman friend in those days. She and Milly were laundry women and neither ever married, not being the sort to offer any great attractions to the male mind, or eye. David was also unwed, though Linda told me that he ordained to find a wife some day after his aunt died and he became the head of the family. They all pinned their hopes on the future and when Linda looked ahead and dreamed of the blessed day she wouldn't have to wash anybody's clothes but her own, she'd begin every speech with "When our dear Aunt Mercy's gone home."

Her brother began to grow grey though not much above thirty years old as yet. He was a grizzled man with his chin the foremost thing about his face and a miser's mouth and grey, stupid eyes. He hadn't much brain—so folk said—but always ready to accept drinks at the "Fisherman's Arms," though shy of standing other men. Linda thought he would be difficult to live with, being a grubby chap in his habits and indifferent to cleanliness. However, he'd had a tidy good sea bath for once when he fetched me out of the surf, and now he stood before father and told his tale and how he'd plunged into the breakers and dragged me ashore by a miracle of pluck and valour.

"There's not many I'd have done it for," said Dave in his slow, gruff voice, "but seeing who it was and knowing what Pete is to you, Farmer, I took the risk."

"And very grateful we all are, Dave," said father. "There's little doubt neither of them would have made shore alive if there had not been you brave fellows waiting and ready to rescue them, and I shall always remember it in your favour, Dave."

He put his hand in his pocket then and pulled out his purse.

"And so shall I always remember it, Dave," I said, "and wish you luck for your valiant deed."

But Gollop had his eye on father's purse by now with the look of a dog waiting for his bone.

"I was in my blacks at the time, being a holiday," so he reminded father. "Little I cared for that when the challenge came; but my trousers are ruined, and my bowler hat haven't been seen since—and new at that."

Those were the days when men of means held gold in their pockets as a matter of course and paper money only appeared in the form of Bank of England notes; so father took two gold sovereigns out of his purse and handed them to the fisherman. To me it seemed a pretty handsome reward for Dave's efforts, and father, I think, was of the same opinion, because, in those far-off times, money ran where it only crawls now; but the visitor showed bitter disappointment. Always hopeful, he had clearly counted on a fortune, while father, well knowing that if Dave hadn't got to me somebody else would, thought two pounds met the case.

Gollop stared, then scowled and he thrust out his chin as if somebody had done him an injury.

"God's truth!" he said. "Don't you set no more store on your maid than that? And you a rich man and offer me two measly quid for saving her life!"

But father wasn't daunted.

"You did what any other decent chap would have done," he said, "but if you feel it a matter of service to be paid for, give me back my two pounds and send in your account. Then I can ask Lawyer Townley about it, Dave."

But poor Gollop wasn't going to give up his two pounds. He put them in his pocket and turned to me as he went off.

"That's all your father's love is worth, my girl," he said, "and I'll let it be known."

Then he went off and father laughed.

"A drop of the old family blood," he told me. "They were a greedy, quarrelsome race and often in trouble with their neighbours. I'll do him a good turn some day. You can always pick up chances to serve people if that way inclined."

"I don't feel to be worth two pounds to anybody—not after

yesterday, Father," I answered. "Least of all to Tom. I'll go down and see how I stand along with him."

"Talk to his father," he advised me. "You can always trust Matt to hold the balance between contending parties. But I hope there won't be any contention. You and the boy were both wrong and only need to own up and be done with it."

With that I went to work and, after dinner, ran down to the Applebys in a contrite spirit and very wishful to let the past bury the past. But I found the past wasn't going to be buried so soon as I'd hoped. Mr. Matthew Appleby called me in, but Tom was out and I heard from the old man that my sweetheart took a very dark view of the doings. His father welcomed me gladly enough however. He was a wise man and noted for it, and he had taken to me from the first and I had taken to him. He worked hard still and his hobby was book-reading, to which he devoted his leisure time. He wasn't so big as Tom but built on the same sturdy lines and he had a thoughtful face with little, old-fashioned whiskers and pale blue, quick eyes. He was a nobler object than Tom, because so many years had passed over his head and his mind was stored with old wisdom and his forehead wrinkled with it. He had been a red man like Tom in his prime, but now his hair had turned white as foam and he wore it long and it gave him a look that reminded you of religion for some queer reason. He was full of religion for that matter and very curious as to the life beyond, but he had a sense of fun, which wasn't handed on to Tom.

"Thank the Powers you came out of that misfortune safe, Pete," he said and kissed me. "A most comfortless affair and the boat gone."

"I've come to say I'm sorry, Mr. Appleby," I told him. "'Twas very wilful of me and I hope he's forgiven me by now."

"Not yet," he said. "Tom's a slow thinker. He hasn't forgiven himself yet for being such a fool as to listen to you, Pete; but once he's forgiven himself, then he'll forgive you no doubt."

"Is he all right?" I asked.

"He's quite well and he's gone to Dartmouth to-day about a new boat."

"He'll have all my savings towards it," I said, "and father will help also, Mr. Appleby."

He laughed his little laugh.

"No, no. Don't you offer anything like that. He'd be a lot too proud to take it. And give him a miss for the present. Let time pass, Time's the only ointment against some wounds."

"All right," I promised. "I'll wait; but tell him when he comes

home I'm properly sorry and I hope he'll call his new boat after me. And tell him I'm thankful to God he wasn't drowned, Mr. Appleby, and I hope he's thankful I wasn't."

"You must take it serious, Pete," he told me. "You turn too much to laughter sometimes, my dear. This is the first serious reverse Tom has ever known in his life, and your first serious reverse bulks big when you're young. He's shook up, but he'll soon shake down again. I'll tell him you're contrite."

I didn't much like this however. I was sorry enough, but I was young, too, and I remembered sitting on the dabs, and the things Tom had said to me, and felt there were two sides to it. And to be told I was contrite hurt me for some silly reason, though true enough, of course.

"I'm learning and schooling so hard as I can," I said, "and getting knowledge to be a valuable right hand to the man, and I can't do more for the minute. And if he ordains not to forgive me, it won't be the end of the world, Mr. Appleby. And I'll give him back my token ring instanter."

He laughed in his tender way again.

"You go back to your books and your birds, my love," he said. "I quite understand. And tell your father I was mighty glad 'Turk' got first prize at Kingsbridge yesterday."

So back I went with a lot to think upon and, as the days went by and Tom didn't show up, my thoughts began to trouble me. But there was worse to come and a fearfuller danger yet to face, though it fell on Tom alone, not me, next time.

CHAPTER V

I FIGURED it out and calmed down. It looked in the nature of things that we should fall out now and again, as the best of lovers will, if only for the pleasure of making it up afterwards. My mother threw light.

"You were both mighty silly, each in your own way," she said, "but Providence overwatched you and saved your lives after you'd risked 'em in a very childish manner—so childish in fact that I don't feel too sure if either of you is old enough to go into marriage at all."

But I thought and waited, and among my thoughts a good bit of wonder what Tom himself might be thinking and if time was healing him as quick as I could wish. I hoped he would have come to my conclusions and everybody's conclusions, that I'd been headstrong

and he'd been weak. I looked at it from his point of view, which is always a fair thing to do when you fall out with a neighbour, and a vital thing to do if you fall out with your lover. Then, as time passed and he didn't show up, I ran to extremes and took a dark view and couldn't let down my food with my usual appetite. 'Of course,' I thought, 'if he harbours malice against me, then that's the end of it and I'm well shut of him. Providence might have known we weren't suited and took steps to part us accordingly.' But then I'd find myself loving him as much as ever and hating the blank he'd left and yearning for his red hair and his arm round me again. Once or twice there came an impatient urge over me to take the first move and face him and hear the worst; but then a cold chill would fall upon me, that such a thing might ruin all, because I knew Tom was not the sort to let anybody else take the lead where his affairs were concerned.

I could look down and see him on the beach every day, busy lending a hand here and there and waiting, no doubt, for his new boat. For the storm had made a lot of work and trouble for others beside him. Yes, I could see him lending a hand, but though only a little way distant in his body, I had no idea how far away he might be in his mind. So I went up and down between hope and fear, and father comforted me.

"Love's love," he said, "and since you properly loved each other, then you'll come together again in good time. You called the tune on that hateful day, Pete, and you must let him call the next tune when he wills to do so."

"In reason, Father," I answered him, for I'd got a feeling now that Tom looked at it this way. I crept into his mind, or thought I had, and reckoned that he was feeling now I had put him to shame. That was a dark thought, because to be put to shame is the most awful thing that can overget a proud man and he might hate me now a deal fiercer than ever he'd loved me before.

"And who can fairly blame him?" I asked myself.

Then I began to fear that my errors were a good size larger than his, and I never sang so small in my own ears as I did when I remembered how I'd called him a coward. Next I got sick of looking at it from his point of view, because the more I did so, the quicker hope died in me. I had my pride likewise; and there came another twenty-four hours when my pride worked up again and kicked against the pricks. And then I just hung on to love and let that conquer me, and hoped that his love would conquer him the same way.

Presently there came a ray of light because Tom's father dropped in, as he was wont of an evening, to chat and smoke his pipe with my father. Dad sent me packing when he arrived, but

after Mr. Appleby was gone again, I heard, through my mother, something of how things looked to be.

"Matt put it very clear," said my mother to me, "and there's no call why you shouldn't hear about it. Your young man has considered his feelings and weighed you in the balance very deliberate and also listened to his father on the subject. He's been mistrusting you good and hard, but he's got to see now how it was your ignorance and his weakness allowed you both to play the fool. Some days he still reckons you were most to blame, but on his sensible days, he's fairer. He said a very proper thing to his father and I bore it in mind. He said 'If I'd had the sense of a smelt, I'd never have let her go. Then we'd have had a proper rumpus no doubt and very likely parted for a bit till we'd both cooled down; because then, when she saw that big weather blow up, her wits would have proved to her that I was right and she was wrong. After which, with her sense, she'd have given me best.' That's what Tom said, according to his father's report; and that's how it would have been no doubt, Pete."

On the whole I took this kindly, because it sounded true in my opinion.

"Would you say he was loving me still, Mother?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "At bottom he's loving you and feeling to miss you out of his life no doubt, same as you miss him. He's forgiven you be sure, but he's raw yet, so you'd best to let more time pass. His new boat will comfort him."

So I held on and kept away and hoped every morn he'd come before the day was done; and then a queer thing indeed overtook us, for we were drawing together and each longing for the other one until the longing moved us on the self-same day and the self-same hour! There came an evening when I set out to go and see him and hear him once more, because I felt I couldn't bear life without him another hour. I never was one to stand up to suspense very comfortable and I told myself I must know whether he was lost, or at any rate on the way back; and by an odd miracle, as we found out long afterwards, Tom had reached to exactly the same pitch! So, preparing to go down the hill, through a field called "Bull's Lease," where "Turk II" lived, if I didn't come face to face with Tom tramping up to have it out, for he wanted to be done with it and in smooth water on an even keel again.

"There my life!" I cried, as he came up the lane just when I was opening the gate to go down through "Bull's Lease" and save a quarter of a mile. "Oh, Tom, I was afoot this instant moment to you because I couldn't stand no more of this horrid emptiness!"

"And I was coming up to you, Pete," he answered.

Rather a shame-faced pair we were and not very quick with our tongues for the minute; and such are the cruel, senseless ways of youth that, even then, neither of us said the word in season to bridge the gap and come in each other's arms again. But pitiful pride still cumbered our silly souls and, save for the fearful thing to follow, we might have parted for evermore five minutes after we'd come together again!

He didn't kiss me nor yet cuddle me; he was cold and the chill had got in his voice.

"I hope you have took no ill from that day's ugly work," he said.

"No," I replied. "None whatever, and I'm glad you didn't. But you took grave ill from the loss of the *Morning Star*, however you might decide about me and whatever I might decide about you, Tom. And I ordain to give all my savings—twenty-five pounds—towards the price of the new one. And that will make us quits for me calling you a coward which was a very wicked, wrongful word to use."

I meant well, but didn't please him in the least.

"As to that, I don't want your money," he said, "and can pay for my new boat very well. You know whether I'm a coward or not and, if you still go in doubt, there's plenty can tell you. And when you talk about us deciding about each other, what are you trying to say exactly?"

"I said exactly what I meant," I told him. "How was I to know you hadn't thrown me over, keeping away from me as if I was the plague, and how were you to know I might not have changed my mind for that matter?"

"If you're going to take it like that, Pete——" he began, then changed his mind and went on. "You was coming to me—so you say. Why? To tell me you'd changed your mind? Because if so——"

"I told you why I was coming," I answered, and felt the blood coursing through my veins and my heart going too quick. "I was coming because I couldn't stop away; but I don't feel so sorry for my sins as I did when I started, and I don't see no call to grovel in any case."

"Offering your silly money and well knowing I'd be the last on earth to take it," he went on.

"Best you go if that's the spirit brought you up the hill," I flamed out. "I don't want to look a fool in my own eyes no more, though I do in yours. And whether 'twas bravery or cowardice, to push me head over tail on to a pile of dabs when I was trying to help you, you know so well as I do. And, for the rest, I'm sorry I named you a

coward and I'm sorrier still I ever set eyes on you. And now you can go!"

That was the way I talked to Tom, and him on the brink of his grave at the moment if I'd but known it!

We glared at each other like a pair of cat-a-mountains for he was as angry as I was, but kept his mouth shut. Then he turned his back on me and got over the gate where we had been standing and made to go across the field, which was a short cut down to Beesworthy. But I knew Turk was out grazing and though the gloaming had come down by now, I could see the bull lying on the grass. So I spoke again.

"Turk's down there, Tom Appleby," I said, "so best get out before he sees you."

He was glad of an excuse by now to let off his temper.

"Bulls!" he said in a passion. "Who's afraid of bulls but you farm people? Be damned to the bull! Danger is on the sea, not the land, and you shan't have no more chances to call me a coward, Petronella Blanchard!"

"For God's love—not mine—get out of it," I said. "'Tis what I know about the bull, not what you think about him. Come back. He hates men and he's in a beastly temper for the minute. Oh, Tom, please!"

But he was stubborn in his turn and ploughed down over the field, too angry to care two pins for the bull. And if "Turk" had been a tiger he'd have done the same. No doubt he thought, if it came to action, he could trust his feet to carry him into safety.

I shouted to him again and then climbed the gate and went after him.

"Don't be a fool; don't be what I was," I cried out. "I've given you best about the sea, give me best about the bull if you've got a mite of sense left!"

He was fifty yards into the field now and another hundred to go before he got across. He'd seen the bull, for he couldn't miss the great white bulk of him. "Turk" was lying down chewing his cud and taking the evening air pretty quiet; but he'd heard me shouting and now he turned and saw Tom and hove up quick on to his legs. I screamed out to him.

"Bully! Bully! Bully! Come here boy; come to Pete;" I shouted; but he'd got his back to me now and had marked a stranger man. He snorted, tore at the ground with his fore feet, and then Tom suddenly found a ton of angry beef on his track and the nearmost hedge best part of fifty yards to reach. For the gate at the bottom of the field was far beyond his powers to

get to. He took to his heels good and fast, poor chap, and knew well enough by now that if he saved his skin, it would be a fool's skin he did save. So there was I running and screaming at the bull, to distract him if I could, and "Turk" getting into his stride and Tom tracking for the hedge very quick indeed but not quick enough, because a dewy meadow isn't the place to show your speed at any time, nor a pair of sea-boots the best things to run in. He'd got a good start, but even a middle-aged bull can go a lot faster than a man and the creature was gaining pretty quick. I reckoned he'd catch Tom at the hedge before he had time to climb it and squash him against it like an egg-shell and my heart was in my mouth by now. He heard me yelling and then he heard the bull pounding behind and did a witty thing, for he took off his jacket and threw it down, hoping that it might delay the pursuer for a moment or two. But "Turk" didn't stop till he and Tom closed in upon the hedge together. It was a fairly tall earth bank topped with hazel and elm trees, so, unless lightning out of heaven struck the bull, Tom looked to be doomed. Then all was over in five seconds, though they stretched into eternity for me. "Turk" got to him well inside the hedge by the will of God, for if he'd been sooner, he'd have caught him in the open, then trampled on him and turned him into rags and bones; while a yard later, he'd have had Tom against the hedge and smashed him there; but what did happen was that the bull put down his head sideways and tossed Tom with all the might of his huge carcass behind the drive. And that pitched my longshore fisherman the way he was going. He crashed on top of the hedge as if he'd been shot from a gun, just missed getting brained against an elm and dropped on the other side. Then I came up and I smacked the bull on his face and cussed him for a godless rascal and left him puzzled to death in his little bull's mind to know what he'd done except to save me from an enemy. Next I got up the hedge and jumped down t'other side to look after my lover.

He was lying panting on his back when I came to him and stared at me in a dazed fashion as if he didn't know who I might happen to be, or why I'd come. I fetched out my handkerchief to mop some blood he'd got streaming down his face and then I asked him to feel himself over and see if anything was broken, and he obeyed like a lamb and tried out his arms and legs but spoke naught. When he came to his left leg he said there was something parlous wrong with that, but he was all right everywhere else, and I told him how the bull had tossed him through the hedge.

"He pitched you over," I said, "but if you don't feel any pain

Those were the days long before they took X-ray photographs of ur inside, or anything like that, and nobody ever heard of his ppendix and such-like gadgets until years later. Millions of people ed quiet and orderly of fatal ills not yet discovered, just as millions people lived without such fine things as vitamins and tomato ice and other cauteries to lengthen life. But what the wits n't know, the heart don't grieve about, and the doctors were usted and thought just as well upon then as now.

What rejoiced me was that Tom had got to stop in bed for a day r two, and, when he argued to rise up and don his clothes again and o home, Doctor Meadows forbade and ordered that he mustn't put oot to ground till his frame was trustable. Then he went off and his oy brought up a draught to be taken last thing, and a pot of ointment o be rubbed on sore spots and a bandage for his foot. Then Mr. Appleby laid out the whole come-along of it, much to the credit f Providence and how our bull was ordained by Higher Powers to nake safe a marriage planned in heaven and threatened to come to naught by the pair most concerned.

"We were going to thank God for all his mercies and keep our nouths shut, Mr. Appleby," I confessed, "but 'tis too big a thing o hide under a bushel no doubt."

"Everybody knows you were a fool on the sea, Pete," he said, 'and Tom was a fool on the land, so now each can mark the foolery f the other."

"I was a fool on sea and land both, Mr. Appleby," I pointed out.

"Light has come to you both," explained the old man, "and now ou have learned each other better than ever you did before, so it's up to the pair of you never to get in such a fix again. When the danger signal's hoisted, use all your wits to keep out of danger."

We promised most faithful to watch over ourselves.

"Once bit, twice shy, dear Mr. Appleby," I said, and then he struck a lighter note and distracted our minds.

"I was very much amused about Dave Gollop's grievances and must tell you, Moses," he said to father. "I went into the 'Fisherman's Arms' to talk to George Forrester and have a drink of spirits a few nights since, and there was David in the public bar airing his troubles. Like a lot of people, he confused something that was outside money value, with something else which was not. He counted on fifty pounds for pulling you out of the water, Pete, and built up a picture of his reward in cash, being that sort of man. He couldn't see a human life was an item above price and not to be calculated in money."

"Who saved you, Tom?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered. "There was a dozen good c in the water and so soon as my feet touched bottom I was safe."

"Father's going to do Dave a good turn when the chance con I said.

"And find it he surely will," foretold Mr. Appleby.

Then he went home in a very kindly humour and I waited the medicine came and gave Tom his draught, and mother tied bandage.

CHAPTER VI

In three days my sweetheart stood on his feet again and hunge for the sea, though very lame and called to travel on two sticks one more day after that. But no evil symptoms appeared Dr. Meadows pronounced him cured and said he might go ho Which he did do on the evening of the fourth day. He was v wishful to see "Turk II" and went so far as the fatal gate, an brought Bully along by the ear and Tom gazed upon him and gc tidy good notion now of what he'd escaped from. I drove him ho in our market cart, and a week later there was the great excitem of his new boat coming round from Dartmouth, with me and him meet her on the Strand. A lovely boat and he'd nursed a surpı for me, because her name was already painted upon her and h called her *Petronella*. We were loving each other again to the utm possible degree by now and he said once, that few lovers were e likely to rise to such a ferment of devotion as we did, because few h ever been through such adventures.

"It was a sign-post that showed us the right road and we taken it," I said, and he agreed.

"You just say the word 'Turk' to me when I'm showing my cla in time to come," he replied, "and I'll darn soon draw them in again

Not that he ever showed any claws to anybody, for he was l father's son and a most reasonable man and developed a wondro patience with everything that happened to us in after years.

I had speech with Linda Gollop about then and she threw a litt light on David's flare-up.

"You see, Pete," she said, "he's a man that lives on hope—que thing in his case because there's but one way how hope can ever tu into reality for him or me, or Milly. But hope bursts out like flame in Dave and when he saved you he saw the promised lan He's long wanted a new craft, because the *Merry Milkmaid*—that

Dave's boat—is got to a state when the bottom might fall out of her any day, and, him being no swimmer, if she foundered in deep water, that would be the finish of Dave. He's said in plain speech that only the Hand of God lies between him and a watery death. But it leapt to his mind that his danger had been taken into account and now, by saving you, he was going to get the needful for a trustworthy craft; so he's feeling he did his part and Providence did its part, but Mr. Blanchard went back on the pair of 'em and didn't do his part."

"I see, Linda—I quite see," I said, and then gave her a bit of Mr. Appleby's wisdom and explained to her that human life is priceless. She was a nice woman and sweet-tempered too, but not very bright, and I couldn't make her understand.

"If your father wouldn't run to big money, you'd have thought your sweetheart might," suggested Linda. "You was worth more even than his boat to him surely."

You couldn't well argue with her on such a question and I changed the subject.

"You've always got your Aunt Mercy to lean upon," I reminded Linda. "She can't live for ever, wonderful though she is, and you'll come into your reward after she goes—all of you."

"Yes," she admitted. "Dave says Aunt Mercy's our lighthouse on a stormy sea and his hope mounts some days and sinks a bit on others. He puts his faith in the fact that she drinks a lot too much spirits and it's going to tell on her any time now. It's her eighty-fourth birthday next May, so we have got plenty of time to collect our gifts. She will have them, and this year Dave forgot her birthday present and caught it in consequence."

"You and Milly are her right and left hand, I'm sure," I said, "and she's very well-to-do by all accounts and no friends to name now, because they must all be dead."

"She never had any to our knowledge," declared Linda. "Only the man who gave her that fearful violin and taught her to play it; but he's been gone these years and years. In my opinion 'tis a race between Aunt Mercy going and Dave's boat sinking."

"Why doesn't he ask her for a new boat?" I suggested and Linda laughed. She didn't often laugh, there being little to laugh at in laundry work to a mind like hers; but the thought of her aunt giving her brother money to buy a boat amused her in a feeble sort of way.

"Lord love you, Pete," she said, "if Dave was to go to the bottom to-morrow, she wouldn't turn a hair! She don't care a brass button for any of us really."

"And all you do for her!" I exclaimed.

"'Tis bread cast upon the waters," she answered, "but with a woman like her—deep as a well and hard as a stone—me and Milly can't feel but doubtful."

Old Miss Gollop was an outstanding feature of Beesworthy in those days and carried on the traditions of the Gollop race—all gone now but her—because David and his sisters, though the last remains of the family, had none of the fearsome qualities of their breed. She lived alone at a house on the cliff called "Sunshine Lodge" and, for her companions, she had a tom-cat, called "Arthur" and a tame raven, known as "Satan." Though so elderly she was spry still and had her fiddle for comfort and smoked a pipe and went her own way in everything. She was thought to be a secret drinker, though there didn't seem to be much secrecy about it, because George Forrester, at the "Fisherman's Arms," confessed that for bottled liquor she could be called his best customer, year in, year out. Rum was her weakness. She was a brown woman with a big, wrinkled face, hard mouth, white hair and small, sharp, black eyes that never called for glasses and saw everything they wanted to and nothing they didn't want to. She was kind to the animal kingdom but cruel to humans and hated children. A bitter voice, and Linda said that when she got a cold, you couldn't tell whether it was she or her raven croaking. She hadn't got any friends save Lawyer Simon Townley, who looked after her affairs. Indeed Dave Gollop, who trusted nobody, least of all a lawyer, thought it a bad sign that Mr. Townley was so thick with her. Nobody in their senses could cultivate Mercy Gollop for pleasure, so her nephew argued, and therefore he feared sometimes that the lawyer was most likely doing so to feather his own nest. Against which his sister Mildred, who had more sense and was harder than Linda, said the lawyer wasn't born to best her Aunt Mercy, and that if Mr. Townley tried to do so, she'd soon send him packing. I'd always given old Miss Gollop "good day" for years if I chanced to meet her, but she'd only return an off-hand nod, because Birch Hanger had belonged to her people in the far past and she'd worked there as a girl and couldn't forget it. But I won her at last, because I took in a rabbit for her famous raven once and it was a great success and I often brought her one now and she'd accept 'em and let me look at her beautiful "Satan." And once she played her fiddle to me. Her face was always fierce and I never saw a kind look upon it except when she was scraping away at her fiddle. There were scores of stories about her, some true and some untrue; but no doubt in her prime she had been a right down Gollop, though grown too old now to make any trouble for her neighbours. I went to see her and took her a rabbit the week after I was reconciled with Tom, because I felt

rather proud in a way of being on terms with her. Nobody else ever called, except Dave and his sisters; but they went as slaves because they had to, while I dropped in now and again as a free girl beyond her power to order about. When our new vicar, Mr. Tozer, came, he called and hoped to find another friend; but she didn't even dust a chair for him. She looked him up and down and told him he was a lot too young to be a minister and that, for her part, she had no religion, but got on very well without it and hoped he wouldn't call again. He tried once more, being young certainly but sporting and a rider to hounds and brave enough. The second time he came she was in her garden and saw him pass through her wicket-gate and ordered him off the premises. So he went and didn't return.

She was sitting smoking her pipe and reading an old newspaper when I called, and she thanked me for a fine rabbit and went so far as to say she had been glad to learn I wasn't drowned.

"Simon Townley tells me the fault was yours," she said, "but a man will always put the fault on a woman if he can, ever since Adam ratted on Eve."

I related the sequel and how Tom had been very near killed by our bull, but lived to make it up with me.

She didn't often laugh, but, if you wanted to make her, the way was to tell her about somebody's misfortunes. That always got a grin out of her.

"I'd like to have seen young Appleby hove over the hedge by a raging bull," she said. "Funny sight for you that. There's not much to make you smile at my age; but that was one laugh I've got out of you, and t'other was to hear my god-forgotten nephew whimpering because your father only gave him two quid for getting wet dragging you to shore when you was wrecked. 'Hell,' I said to David, 'what do you think any human creature's worth, you zany? If I'd been down to the beach, I'd have done so much myself and made no song about it.'"

We talked a bit but it was one of her moody days and she soon told me to go, yet said one friendly thing before I went.

"If you don't have any more rows with the man but drag him to the altar and marry him, I'll give you a wedding gift, Pete," she said. "You can remind me if ever you fix the day."

"I will," I promised. "We'll never fall out again, Miss Gollop."

She looked at me out of her little black eyes.

"Men are all the same pattern at bottom," she declared, "and if you know the things your father does and says, then you'll find your husband does and says much the same and your son, if you get one,

will grow up likewise. They're not so devious as what we are and easier to read."

"I expect that's true," I said.

"Yes, it's true. They are much poorer liars than us, for example. I always know when a man is lying, but not always when a woman may be. Men lie as readily as we do, but not so well. We know a lot more about them than they do themselves, and they don't know a living thing about us really."

"Wonderful," I said, "that, being unmarried like you are, you know them so well, Miss Gollop."

"You don't need to be married to know 'em," she answered. "I was thrown a lot among men in my youth, when I did man's work at Birch Hanger, and I'd got a stronger brain than most of 'em and a stronger body too. I've shamed 'em before now by doing single-handed what they reckoned wanted four hands."

I always found her interesting, and her lawyer, Mr. Simon Townley, also found her interesting, as I learned in future time; but most people merely found her beastly and children fled from her.

Christmas came again and the time rushed on very quick. I would have died before I ever invited myself to go out on the water with him again; but, when he invited me, I felt thankful, for it seemed to bring us together once for all. His father had a poor winter in health and was called to keep the house through January month after a sharp attack of bronchitis, so Tom had a lot of selling fish ashore as well as catching them in the sea. I lent a hand when I could and saw a good bit of my future father-in-law and helped to pass the time for him and keep his accounts. For my education was brightening up a lot now and I still worked at my lessons. Geography and birds were the subjects I best liked, and old Mr. Appleby was very much pleased at my better understanding about the map of the world outside England.

"When you come to challenge yourself," he said to me once, "it's amazing to discover how little you know concerning the plan of the earth at large, let alone your own country."

"Geography enlarges your mind, Mr. Appleby," I answered, "and shows Beesworthy isn't the centre of the universe really, though, being Tom's home, it is the centre of the universe to me."

"From Devon your mind should travel over the whole island," he explained, "and then off and away to Europe and America and Australia."

He loved a book and, being able to read aloud pretty well by now, I'd read to him sometimes when I could spare an hour and rest his

eyes. He felt to be growing old and the discovery rather surprised him.

"Age is a queer thing, Pete," he said to me on a day after I'd been reading something about it. "It comes by fits and starts. You'll wake up one morning feeling so old as the hills and wondering how you're going to put your clothes on; and next morning you'll find yourself years younger."

"So father tells me," I answered.

"An upstanding man and made of sense," he declared. Then he went on.

"The most wonderful thing about old age is to discover it teaches you, if nothing else, how much you can do without, Pete. The older you grow, the less you need and the less you expect, and the less you get, and the less you feel disappointed when you don't get it. When you're young you want the moon and a lot more besides, but once over the seventy mark, your main interest is your food and a comfortable bed. Your bed grows up to be among the few friends left."

"That's how you talk on your bad days, Mr. Appleby," I said, "not on your spry ones. You'll never be a bed-lier, and live to go on reading in your books till you are a hundred most likely."

He could be most amusing too on some subjects. He was addicted to dogs for one thing. Generations of dogs he had kept, over-lapping each other, and told me he hadn't been without one for fifty years.

His eye always brightened if talk went doggy.

"Ah!" he said once, when a man was talking about his leavings after he was gone. "Dogs now—dogs want no place in our wills. They're quite content to have a corner in our hearts. Not so with cats, however."

He'd talk like that on his good days and when he got well again and went his rounds once more, we heard no more about him growing old.

Among his best friends stood Lawyer Townley, who would often drop in and sometimes fetch a book with him. They were the best educated men in the parish and suited each other well; and at my wedding, when the great day came, Matthew Appleby and Simon Townley attended the ceremony and father gave me away. Micah Widecombe, the shoesmith, stood best man for Tom, and I had Phyllis and our dairymaid, a great friend of mine, for bridesmaids. The choir sang and the church bells rang at my wedding with Tom, and a most successful wedding breakfast at Birch Hanger followed after, just as we had when Primrose was married. Her little sons were the pages in bright costumes, all silvery, like dolls off a Christmas tree, and the new vicar didn't use a Homily but addressed us out of his

head, which Tom thought was a bit saucy, because we weren't wanting any advice from a sporting parson not above thirty-three years old and unmarried at that. We had the covered wagonette from the "Fisherman's Arms" to drive us up to Kingsbridge, and finally we got to Plymouth and spent our honeymoon to great advantage there. We were often down on the Barbican among the fishermen and went out with them now and again, and we also took trips in a little pleasure steamer, and once we went up the river among the big craft as far as Saltash and saw the wondrous bridge there. Another time we sailed to sea round the Eddystone lighthouse, and Tom always said after how a big, three-master in full sail on her way down Channel was the grandest sight, after myself, that had ever filled his eyes.

Mercy Gollop wouldn't come to our wedding, but she remembered her promise and last time I went to see her before the great day, she gave me a flame new Bank Note for five pounds!

"I don't know what the mischief you want or don't want, so you can buy what you fancy down to Plymouth," she said, "and spend it on yourself, not him."

I did as she ordered and bought some pretty crockery for our parlour, and old Mercy, who was very fond of crockery herself, came into my house long afterwards and saw it. She looked at it in her piercing way.

"It takes all sorts to make a world no doubt," she said and no more.

I've wondered ever since what she meant, but nobody ever threw any light on it.

CHAPTER VII

TOM and I settled into married life very steadfastly and folk agreed we were to the manner born and promising to make a happy pair. So we did, and, looking back over our twenty-eight years together, I can't mark a joy or a sorrow not shared fair and square between us. Twenty-eight years is a long time and much must happen over such a period calling for attention whether good or bad; but in our case, the good wasn't very greatly to the front and the bad nothing we couldn't face together. Tom's hopes didn't come in sight as we had expected, and mine failed likewise; but he had my sympathy and he shared mine sharply enough because they hit him too and there was no blame attaching, but only the work of Nature which ran against me.

The first thing to be called outstanding, after we were settled in

ur home, overtook the Gollop family, and made a good deal of talk t the time. It came on gradually and ended in an explosion that hrew a lot of light on various mysteries, as explosions are apt to do. t began when, walking down the path to Beesworthy on a June fternoon, I met Milly and Linda Gollop sitting upon a wayside at together and dressed in their Sunday clothes—a most unusual ght for a week-day. So I stopped and sat down with them and isked why they were pleasuring in their best garments on a Friday. They told me how they had asked permission for an afternoon out rom the laundry and it had been granted to them.

"Well you may stare, Pete," said Linda, "but it's this way. To-day is Aunt Mercy Gollop's birthday and she's very jealous about t and we are always called to mark the day and make a fuss upon it. We're on the way this minute and only waiting for David to turn up."

"I see," I said. "Glad I met you. I'll take her some eggs to-night. How old is Miss Gollop to-day?"

"We hoped in our hearts that her last birthday was going to be he very last," answered Milly, "but here she is again—eighty-four, and no immediate sign of a finish."

She knew she could trust me, else she wouldn't have talked like that.

"Acid as a lemon and hard as a flint still," went on Milly. "The only funny thing about her is her name—a woman that never knew the meaning of the word."

Linda sighed and nodded her head.

"There's some people can't manage to be Christians, try as they may," she said.

"Flouts this world and everybody in it," added Milly, "yet so confident of the happy land as the best people."

"Just takes heaven as a matter of course, when she finds herself in a mood to go there," agreed Linda.

"For five-and-twenty years we've ministered to her, Pete," Milly told me. "For all that time you may say she has been our cross."

"Our cross all right, and did ought to become our crown before so very long," sighed Linda.

"There's a lot more crosses than crowns going about," I said, "so father always tells me; but I hope you're right, Linda. You and Milly and Dave are all the relations she's got in the world and no friends but 'Satan' and 'Arthur,' and she can't leave her money and her house and grounds to her raven and her cat."

"David's cocksure we must get the lot," explained Milly. "We've been staunch and faithful, year in year out, and endured a cruel lot at that. And what other friends has she got? For my part

I'd say her filthy fiddle was more of a friend than even her animals. If ever I hated anything on earth it's that fiddle. Lord knows how often we have had to sit and watch her drawing hideous noises out of the thing."

Then she turned to another unfavourable side of her aunt.

"And so cruel contemptuous, Pete. Scorns us to our faces because we're laundry-women and earn our living by washing the people's clothes!"

"And despises David, too, because he's only a longshore fisherman," said Linda.

"Well, there must be laundry-women and there must be longshore fishermen," I said.

"She holds it for a come-down in the Gollop family," went on Linda. "They have took their place in the parish for a hundred years and farmed land and been somebody in the old days."

"And ain't you respected? Who but your aunt ever spoke a word in your dishonour?" I asked.

"We may be so poor as church mice, if not poorer," murmured Linda, "but that's no crime, just a misfortune."

"Does she give you presents on your birthdays?" I asked.

"Not a chance!" answered Milly. "The only present she was ever known to give, was the five pound note you had off her on your marriage, Pete."

Then their brother came up the hill. He was in his Sunday blacks, too, and carrying a brown paper parcel under his arm.

"He's remembered," said Milly as Dave arrived.

"Well, girls," he began, "another year knocked off the old bird's life."

After that he turned to me.

"Do you ordain to come to the party?" he inquired, "and if so, where's your birthday present? You'll get hell if you're empty-handed, Pete."

I told him I wasn't going to the party.

"But I'll take her some of my nice brown Barnevelder eggs this evening," I promised.

He sat down and mopped his brow for the day was hot. Then they talked about their presents and showed them.

"Milly's taking her a pound tin of that fearful black Virginia tobacco she favours, and I've bought a bottle of her Jamaica rum from Mr. Forrester," explained Linda.

"My! You're doing her well, both of you," said Dave.

"What have you got?" asked Milly, and her brother undid his parcel and showed us the biggest lobster ever I saw in my life.

"My stars! What a proper whacker, Dave!" I cried.

"A darn sight too fine for her, but she shall have it, and that ought to be a good mark for me," he said.

Milly mentioned a painful affair in the past.

"I hope it won't serve her like that crab you gave us served me and Linda," she reminded him and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't harp on that crab no more; I was sorry at the time and now I'm sick of it," he replied.

"So were we," replied Linda. "You might have lost us Dave, but for Doctor Meadows."

"I paid doctor's bill, didn't I?" he asked.

"Least you could do," replied Linda and David looked at his watch.

"Come on," he said, "and let's get it over. Three o'clock was her hour. So like as not she'll feed this grand lobster to her animals and say it was too tough for her false teeth."

They considered their aunt's pets then as his sisters rose up to start.

"Dave hates 'Satan' worse than he hates Aunt Mercy, don't you, Dave?" asked Milly and he admitted it.

"Yes, I'd say I do," he answered. "That carrion fowl's more than a bird: he's got an evil spirit in him. He looks at you and measures you up out of his shoe-button eyes and croaks to himself."

"I feel the same to 'Arthur,'" added Milly. "That cat carries a lot up his sleeve, or so I always feel."

"'Tis pull devil, pull baker, between him and Aunt Mercy," so Linda said, and David laughed.

"And he knows damn well when he's beat, and she knows damn well when she is," he said.

"But a beautiful tabby cat," I told him, because I always admired 'Arthur' myself.

Then they went off together.

"Now for 'Sunshine Lodge,'" said David, "though I always think 'Hell Corner' would have been a better name for it."

They tramped away chattering together, and the same evening I took Miss Gollop a dozen new-laid eggs and my good wishes. She was pleased but not much inclined to talk. She said she had been called to endure her nephew and nieces that afternoon and felt tired. Later on, having seen Tom off in the moonlight for some night work, I turned in where the sisters lived together, to ask them how their birthday party had fared. They dwelt in a little cottage on the front; but David boarded elsewhere, with Mrs. Ford, a sailor's widow.

Linda and Milly—full of their adventures—told me about them while they sewed, for both were famous needle-women and added to their small money in that way.

"We had a tolerable sultry afternoon along with her," said Linda, and Mildred, who liked to talk and spoke very vividly at times, took up the tale.

"As we got to her garden and I was admiring the white lilac tree still in flower over her lattice gate and saying how nice it smelled, Aunt Mercy looked out of her window upon us and told David to wipe his boots before we walked in; then we entered the house-place and there she was, in full state, sitting in her easy chair with her raven in his big cage alongside her. Linda and I rushed forward and kissed her and wished her many happy returns of the day, and David said 'Same here, and never saw you looking better, thank God'; but he didn't kiss her, because they never have been on what you might call kissing terms. She asked Dave if his boots were clean and he said they were spick-and-span and called her attention that he had donned his black to mark the happy day. Then Linda said how we all three circle round her, her being the head of our family."

"And never did our family have a better one, I told her," added Linda.

"Then 'Satan' croaked," went on Milly, "and Aunt Mercy told him to be quiet. 'I hope your beautiful bird has wished you many happy returns,' I said, and she answered and bade us not to blether about her anniversary no more. Then she plunged into things and showed us what was in her mind. 'I'm doing a bit of stock-taking touching you people,' she said, 'same as I did a year ago. And I tell you the same again as I did then. What you three do for me is only a sprat to catch a whale.' Then she ordered 'Satan' to hold his noise, because he would be talking and she continued, 'A sprat to catch a whale—just cheap human nature and I blame none of you for that.' "

"Then I cut in," interrupted Linda. " 'A lot more than human nature, Aunt Mercy. We care for you yourself,' " I said.

"And she told you to dry up, because she didn't want any cant from you," proceeded Milly. " 'You may deceive yourselves,' she said, 'but not me. So there it is,' she went on. 'I'm a woman of property as everybody knows, but I can't take my house and grounds where I'm going, nor my money neither. The dead are penniless the moment they draw their last breath. And you two and David are all I've got in the family line; and never an old woman suffered under such a beggarly set of relations: two laundresses and an inshore fisherman.'

"Then I felt my indignation to be rising," continued Milly, "and I said 'We are as God made us and you have no right to expect too much from us, Aunt Mercy.' 'I don't,' she answered. 'I never expected anything from any of you. Your father was a born fool and your mother ought to have been in the asylum. Marriage is a toss-up best of times; but children are a proper mad gamble every time!' That's the way she talked."

"And I answered her," went on Linda. "I told her that our dear father and mother supported each other in their many difficulties. 'Broken reeds can't support each other,' she replied, and I reminded her that our mother always had a beautiful, giving nature. 'Yes,' she answered, snapping like the teeth of a rat-trap, 'one of those beautiful, giving natures that are always getting in a holy mess themselves and leaving hard, practical folk to pull 'em out.'"

"Darned few she ever lifted a finger to pull out of a mess," went on Milly. "But we were patient. 'Mother taught us to be good anyway,' David said to her, and the raven croaked and Aunt Mercy grinned. 'He's laughing at you, Dave,' she told him. 'Good for what?'"

"Then I spoke the answer," said Linda, "though only to have my mouth shut. 'Good to earn our living and do our duty in that state of life——.' I'd got that far when Aunt Mercy shut me up. 'No cant from you, Linda,' she snapped."

"What had she to grumble at next?" I asked.

"Plenty," replied Milly. "She said that when we'd all done praising ourselves, we could listen to her. 'My dispensations are made,' she told us, 'and Lawyer Townley knows 'em. And what I want you to understand for the minute is this: that if, for one instant you stop doing your duty to me, I'll mighty soon unmake my dispensations.'"

"Just wanted to quarrel," explained Linda, "so I tried to pour oil on the troubled waters, Pete. 'Come, come,' I said. ''Tis your birthday, Aunt Mercy, and you needn't fear we'll ever stop trying to pleasure you.' She calmed down a thought after that and said now the air was cleared, she'd get in a birthday humour, though at eighty-four it was difficult."

"Then she asked us what presents we'd brought to atone for ourselves and I produced my tin of tobacco," proceeded Milly. 'Here's my gift,' I said. 'A whole pound tin of the black Virginian you smoke, and a beautiful picture of Virginia and negroes working on the lid of it.' 'That's the stuff,' she agreed and sniffed at it. 'A whole pound—eh? You're chucking your money about,' she said. 'I saved for it,' I told her 'and I hope you'll smoke every bit yourself.'

'As my raven and my cat and my fiddle don't smoke,' she answered, 'no doubt I shall,' Then she wanted to know what Linda had rose to."

"Did she like the rum?" I asked and Linda answered.

" 'It's the Jamaica you're addicted to,' I told her and pressed the bottle into her hands; but she didn't like my choice of words too well, though she liked the gift. 'I ain't addicted to it at all,' she answered. 'I only take it for medicine; but a clever thought. You girls have done pretty well.' Then Dave promised to come in for a pipe sometimes and Aunt Mercy asked him what he'd brought. 'Here you are,' says Dave and takes his huge lobster out of the brown paper. 'A proper wonder and fit for a show-case and worth a lot.' 'Fresh?' she asked him. 'Out of the sea this morning—took in a pot off the Surf Rocks,' he answered."

"She granted it was large," continued Milly, taking up the tale. "However she bade me put it in the larder and told Linda to fetch her some lettuces and a spring onion or two to go with it to-morrow. 'I'll give it a try though not hopeful' she said, 'but it will serve "Satan" and "Arthur" if not me.' Then I inquired where 'Arthur' might be. 'Where's puss?' I asked. 'He ought to be along with you this afternoon.' 'You need never to ask where a cat is,' she answered. 'He's always where he wants to be. I had a row with my gentleman yesterday and bested him; and when I conquer him, he goes down to Mrs. Mutters and stops there till the clouds roll by.' She laughed then—a noise like a man whetting his scythe. Then she thanked us for our presents and told us they were a lot cleverer than last year."

" 'And may we all be cleverer still next year,' I said," went on Linda, "but she cut me short again. 'That'll do, my girl—no soap from you. I can't live for ever and don't want to,' she told us. 'That's that then,' summed up David, 'and now, to mark the glad day, I hope you're going to give us a tune on your fiddle.' But it seemed almost as if the raven knew Dave was lying, for it croaked in a properly scornful tone of voice, and he lost his temper. 'Damn it!' he cried out, 'can't I open my mouth but that blasted bird——?' He didn't get no further because Aunt Mercy was down on him. 'Stop swearing,' she ordered. 'Nobody swears in this house but me and swearing's gone weak now, like everything else. You ought to have heard your grandfather swear,' she said. 'The spiders shook in their webs and the pigs trembled in their styes when he let out. You all hate music and you girls sit and look as if you were waiting for the dentist when I draw my bow over the strings. But I ain't playing to-day. My mainstring's broke and I've wrote to Plymouth for a new one.' And Linda and I thanked God in secret.

"Next thing was that Dave made her an offer," continued Milly.

" 'How would it be if you come out for half an hour in *The Saucy Sally* along with me?' he asked. 'Do you good. Sea's like a billiards table and sun shining and all. I'll paddle you round and you can look at the sea-gulls.' "

Linda laughed then and took up the story.

"She told him she wouldn't go out in his rotten row-boat for the Bank of England. 'Did you ever hear tell of Peter Gollop?' she inquired, and I explained that we never heard the details because father and mother would never speak of him. 'Then I'll tell you about him—a good tale for my birthday party,' she said."

Then Milly launched out on the ugly subject of Peter Gollop.

"Aunt Mercy cheered up a bit then," she began. "She had known Peter Gollop and his wife when she was a child. 'The only murderer in our family,' she told us. 'We kicked over the traces a bit and were a fighting race and famous for it; but none was a killer before Peter. A quiet chap—a longshore fisherman, like you, David, but twice the man you are, or ever will be, and much handsomer. Very fond of animals and sang in the church choir. He married Penelope Bryant, the fish-hawker's daughter; but she was older than him and hated animals—poor fool. They didn't have much luck with each other at first, but, after a stormy year or two, they settled down and people reckoned they'd got broken in and the worst over.' "

"There never is no worst if you love each other proper from the start, Milly," I explained. "There never was no breaking in for me and Tom."

"You were broken in before you married," she answered and went on about her family murderer.

"A day came when Peter Gollop bought a new fishing-boat and took Penelope for a sail in her one morning when he went to pick up his pots outside Surf Rocks. Peter's wife would take the sea sometimes, same as you take the sea with Tom. But towards evening of that day his boat showed up crawling home with her little flag at half-mast; and when a fisher comes in with his flag half-masted, that means trouble. So a good few gathered on the mole to see him arrive. He was white as a dog's tooth and terrible shaken and, so soon as he could speak, he broke the fearful news.. A squall had took the sail while he was steering and it had flapped over and knocked Penelope into the ocean. He'd done all a man might and very near lost his own life doing it—so he said; but the woman sank and didn't rise to the surface again. He knew the exact spot, behind Surf Rocks, where the fatal thing took place, and next morning the coast-guards put down a drag net and did their best to gather in the corpse—all to no purpose. They couldn't find her, and it wasn't till three days later that she

turned up. And Peter carrying on like a madman ashore, of course, and the folk very sorry for him. A Brixham boat it was that catched up Penelope, and the accident being known, her master brought the body into Beesworthy. So another craft fetched in with her flag at half-mast. Aunt Mercy laughed when she got so far. 'A nasty jar for Peter Gollop that was,' she said."

"Why should it be, Milly?" I asked. "The poor woman might well have drifted out where the trawlers work."

"Because, Pete," explained Mildred, "Penelope dead, told a different story from her husband living. There was a hundredweight of iron fastened to Penelope Gollop—an old kitchen range from Peter's junk store and identified for the one he'd took out of his kitchen when he put in a new range. And more than that; her head bones were broke in. He'd slain her and sunk her far out to sea. Peter hadn't a leg to stand upon before the law. When she'd told that, Aunt Mercy laughed and said, 'And one morning soon after, he hadn't anything else to stand upon either, because he was hanged at Exeter gaol.'"

"What a tale for a birthday party!" I exclaimed, then Linda had a turn.

"There was more to come, Pete. After this fearful story our aunt turned to David and said, 'So now you know why you'll never catch me out of sight of land behind Surf Rocks with you, my lad!' and Dave pretended to be shocked. 'That's next to libel,' he said, 'and if I went to Lawyer Townley, he might take you in court.' Then she laughed and told us for that matter she'd often wished she could cut the thread of certain parties herself.

"'You must do nothing nefarious at your time of life,' I said to her. 'A shocking thing if you was to fall into homicide at eighty-four,' and she admitted it was beyond her now. 'You may still have the pleasure of thinking on a bit of wickedness,' she answered, 'but the flesh has gone too weak to perform it. You want good health and all your wits about you for a murder. You're a darned sight more likely to be murdered yourself at my time of life, so, if I went to sea with Dave and no eye upon us but our Maker's, he might find the pluck to come home alone, and no Christian burial for me then.'"

"David had an answer for that and hit back," went on Milly. "He said, ''Tis thought in the village you won't have no Christian burial whether or no, and Vicar Tozer will put you along with the doubtful ones—in the nettles at the bottom of the yard—all thanks to your godless ways.' Then Aunt Mercy snorted and said. 'What do Tozer know about God—fox-hunting young fool? If the impudent monkey was to deny me "Sure and Certain," I'd haunt him till he

called on the hills to cover him.' Then Dave spoke again. 'You'd make a fearsome ghost sure enough,' he said, and the raven croaked and Aunt Mercy laughed, but not at David—at a horrid idea she'd thought upon. 'There's one thing,' she said, much to her own amusement. 'I'd better like to neighbour with the "also rans" in next world than with the winners: I grant that!' "

"Meaning she'd be more likely to meet her old friends down under than up above," I suggested, and Milly agreed.

"Then I changed the conversation and turned her thoughts to us," she said. "I told her the family was near coming to an end now and it was time Dave took a wife and carried on. 'The likes of him carry on! Not a hope!' she answered. 'I'm the last of the Gollop race. You ain't true Gollops—none of you. We were tough, warlike, feared naught. We lived hard, fought hard, worked hard, made money, and our men bred hard stuff out of hard women. And when the children could earn their keep and knew they wasn't wanted no more, they hopped the nest and often went foreign. They were the sort the Colonies cry for.' "

"And then," continued Linda, "I told her it was a thousand pities she'd never wedded herself to carry on the fine quality. And I reminded her how it was well known she might have married Mr. Ramsbottom—him that taught her to play the fiddle and left her his fiddle in his will. 'Yes,' she said, 'I might have married Sam Ramsbottom, after his second wife died, and I believe in a man being a bit older than his wife for that matter; but not fifty years older. I was twenty when he offered for me, and he was seventy. But you can't put new wine in old bottles.' Then she said she could have married half a score of times, but never met a man up to her standards. 'Seventy-two inches tall on my naked feet in them days and straight as a larch pole,' she said."

"David made a remark then," continued Milly. "He thought there was few men would offer for a six-foot tall woman. 'Oh yes they did,' she said and smiled at her memory. 'I mind one that filled my eye very well,' she told us. 'Dick Danby he was called—a quarry-man. Six feet four inches and broad in the shoulder and lean in the flank, with arms like trip-hammers and strong as a team of horses. Handsome too.' "

"Why didn't she accept him then?" I inquired and Milly explained.

"I asked her that. She said she only cared for Danby's grand appearance and strength and usefulness; but she knew that if she'd took him, he'd have mastered her, and she never meant to be mastered by any man. 'We'd have bred a race of giants if I'd gone to him;

but I went to his funeral instead. Only funeral I ever shall go to but my own,' she said. You see the young man was blown to bits in a quarry, because his mate fired a charge too soon. And in Aunt Mercy's opinion, it was no accident, either. 'Yes,' she went on, after she had finished with Dick Danby, 'I was a comely piece then.' "

" 'And are so still,' I told her," continued Linda, "but all she answered was, 'No hypocrisy from you, please.' Then she told us how she had done work on our grandfather's farm that would break the back of a modern woman. 'They haven't got the bone and muscle I had. Nor young men either for that matter,' she said. But Dave stood up for the young men and assured her they were as hardy and brave as ever they were. And she said 'Brave? Who's brave that's frightened of work? If you dread work, then you're a coward, and real work this generation dread above all else.' "

"You must have had about enough of Miss Gollop's birthday by that time," I suggested to them and Mildred answered that they had.

"I thought we ought to get a move on, myself, about then," she said, "and I proposed we should help her lay the table for her birthday tea; but Aunt Mercy told us there wasn't going to be a birthday tea this year. 'No birthday tea! Well, I never,' cried David. 'Why, we thought we were going to sit down to a fat birthday cake with eighty-four candles blazing around it!' Just a spot of his fun, but she took it wrong, of course. 'And where the hell did you think eighty-four candles were coming from?' she asked him. Then she addressed us all. 'Thank you for your gifts and a plague on your good wishes,' she went on. 'Asking—that's what you are—always asking.' "

"But I withstood that," said Linda. " 'We've never asked for a penny, Aunt Mercy, never once in our lives,' I answered. 'Not with your lips,' she said, 'but I see it in your eyes. You've got beggars' eyes—the pack of you.' "

"What a horrible thing to tell you, Linda," I cried out.

"Yes, wasn't it? Then David rose up and said we'd go on our way and leave her alone in her glory. 'I'll drop in again before long and smoke a pipe with you,' he promised, and she said he'd be welcome if he didn't try to be funny, or smell of fish. Then she reminded me to fetch her lettuces and onions, and I said she should have 'em fresh out of the ground to-morrow morning on my way to work. 'That's right then,' she answered. 'Civility costs nothing and often pays a good return; and impudence often pays a mighty bad return. Remember that, Dave.' "

"Yet, on the top of this warning, if David didn't put his foot in it again!" said Mildred. "He didn't mean anything—it was just one of his stupid jokes you understand—but, as we were trooping off with

our tails between our legs, so to say, he turned and asked Aunt Mercy a sly question. 'You don't want the corkscrew put beside you by any chance before we go?' he asked, and then the raven croaked and our old terror blazed into one of her thunderstorms and her eyes flashed like black lightning."

"Whatever did she say?" I begged to know.

"She poured out a flood of profanity," answered Milly, "which I am not going to repeat, and she told David to go to the devil and not to show his hideous face to her again before she ordered him. We left her and her raven chattering together and staggered out utterly exhausted into the fresh air."

"What a properly fearful birthday party!" I said, and Linda spoke.

"David brought the rebuke on himself all the same," she declared, "and I told him you ought never to mention a delicate subject like a corkscrew to a well-known drinker. But, for the minute, he was angrier with 'Satan' than he was with her. 'I'd give a week's money to strangle that bird,' he said. 'No, Dave, the bird's innocent,' I answered. 'She's taught him to be so rude as herself.' 'Innocent!' he shouted. 'The creature knows everything you tell and laughs in your face as if you were dirt!' 'You may amuse him,' I said, 'but you didn't amuse her. She don't like your light touches and you're a fool to make 'em with Aunt Mercy.' "

"She wasn't feeling very well this afternoon," so Mildred said next. "I always know."

"And I advised Dave it was no good riding the high horse and poking fun at such as her," added Linda. "Because, if you depend upon your betters for your security, same as most of us have got to do, then you need to treat them in a Christian manner even though they are heathens themselves. David said how every human being hungers to conquer sometimes, which was the Gollop blood in him no doubt, and I told him that Milly and I had long learned to conquer ourselves."

"So we have," added Milly, "and the only people we ever did conquer, I'm sure."

I made ready now to leave them and go down to the beach, because Tom was pretty near due back; but they hadn't quite finished their sad tale.

"There was one ray of brightness arose out of the afternoon, as David pointed out," said Linda. "We hadn't marked it, but he had. 'It's to the good,' he said, 'that her dispensations run in our favour,' and we asked how he knew that. 'Because she thought to terrify us when she said she might change 'em even yet,' he explained. 'As they stand they are probably all right, so we must humour the old curse a bit more. Most likely a drop extra of rum yesterday made her

so acid to-day.' I agreed with him, so did Milly, because nothing puts an edge to a man's tongue like a hang-over."

"Then I asked him how it might be if we sounded Lawyer Townley as to her intentions," went on Milly, "but Dave said he wouldn't be legalised to tell us. 'He's always very civil to us—a good sign that, because he knows what's in the will and is wishful to keep our custom after she's gone,' so Dave said."

"There's a lot happens at 'Sunshine Lodge' only known to her cat and her raven and her conscience," continued Milly. "I touched her affairs delicate to Aunt Mercy once and asked her if we might run about for her a bit more and do what she wanted; but she said that we hadn't got the brain-power to know what an old woman wanted, though we weren't far short of old women ourselves nowadays. Sometimes I think her brain's tottering."

"A mystery she's lived and a mystery she'll die," summed up Linda. "I always long to feel more hopeful where the poor old soul's going after she's gone," she sighed. "I'd like to think the Everlasting Mercy would overlook her career——"

Then Mildred went rather far, for she laughed and spoke very coarsely.

"A fat lot I mind where she's going," she said, "all I care about is when."

I felt to have had about enough of the Gollops by then and left them and went out into the moonlight air and presently helped Tom bring in his catch. Little did we think at the time what was blowing up for David and Milly and Linda, and my husband only laughed to hear about their dismal afternoon.

"Father told me once," he said, "that you can guess at a dead man's shoes most times, but never at a dead woman's. Least of all such a woman as old Mercy."

So that was the beginning of the strange affairs to follow and I got drawn into them—not against my own will exactly, but very much to my astonishment.

CHAPTER VIII

LITTLE did anybody guess what next morning was going to bring forth, not only for the Gollops, but for the parish you might almost say. In itself it was just a common act of nature, but behind it, there arose most fantastic complications and something to talk about for weeks. I was in it from the beginning, for next morning, after shopping in Beesworthy, I met Linda Gollop. She and Mildred

lways went home from their work for dinner, but she was alone and ery late and by no means herself. A most calm, quiet woman as a ule with nothing to catch the eye about her, but to-day she was valking fast and a lock of her hair had come unloosed and her hat vasn't straight and her mild little face looking as wild as a hawk.

"My stars, Linda!" I said, "what's over-got you, my dear? You ook so mad as a March hare!"

"The day of my life, Pete," she gasped out. "Signs and wonders—gns and wonders!"

Well, to hear Linda say such a thing was wonderful enough without ny additions, and she begged me to go home with her and hear the hole tale.

"Milly don't know a word yet," she said, "but the parish will ng with it before nightfall I expect. If you like to come along, you hall hear, Pete."

I didn't feel much disposed to the Gollops again this morning—not ıfter yesterday night—but I couldn't well refuse to come and felt nore inquisitive than usual seeing Linda's appearance.

"I'll come certainly if I can be of any use to you," I told her and nended my pace, for still she pushed on very fast.

Milly was waiting for her in their cottage, and cross and worried ıt that.

"At last!" she said. "Where the mischief have you been—rightening my soul out of my body?"

"Oh, Milly—oh my dear life—what a day! Let me sit down. My legs is dropping off me," puffed Linda.

"I'll tell you one thing," began her sister. "The manager emanded to hear where you was got to, and I told him I didn't know om Adam. I said you'd started as usual before me and I counted o find you at work. And he was furious. He said it might suit the oal-miners to go absconding, but it didn't suit the laundry for his vomen to do so. And he said if your fancy calls you to keep away again, you can stop away."

"Give me something to drink for Lord's sake," gasped Linda. "There's times when your duty cries out louder than your business. I'd got to abscond by the will of God and what I have to tell would fill a book."

"Tell it then," answered her sister. "Here's your dinner—the end of the mutton and cold as charity by now. And we'd best be going to work if we don't both want to get fired."

"The day of my life in a manner of speaking," said Linda still panting and gazing wildly upon us.

"Somebody asked you to marry him?" asked Milly in her grim Gollop way.

Linda drank off a cup of tea and started.

"The beginning was that I rose up a thought early before you were awake or the alarm had gone, to obey Aunt Mercy's orders. First I went to Dingle's, and there he was, good and early too, and I bought two lettuces, with the dew fresh on 'em, for a penny and another penny for a few spring onions. Then off to 'Sunshine Lodge' and heard church clock tell half-past seven as I got there. Plenty of time and the sun up over the sea and her white lilac scenting the morning air."

"Never mind all that," said Milly. "Get on with it."

"I expected to find her up of course," went forward Linda. "Seven-thirty being her breakfast hour since living memory. But she wasn't up."

"Not up at half-past seven!" I exclaimed.

"No, Pete. Not up at half-past seven, and the white blind down over her bedroom window still. And other wondrous events beside that. There stood her milk bottle, waiting to be took in and beside it sat 'Arthur,' also waiting to be took in."

"Back from Mrs. Mutters?" I said.

"Never mind all that. What did you do?" asked Mildred.

"A rash thing for me," admitted Linda. "The situation spurred me to pick up a pinch of gravel and chuck it up at her window to rouse her. But there was a sizeable little stone along with the gravel and the next thing I saw, I'd broke her bottom pane on the left hand side—cracked right across!"

"She'll make you pay for that," said Milly.

"So I thought and expected to see her glare out and was half in a mind to flee," answered Linda. "But nothing happened, so then I knew something *must* have happened and I went round to the window of her new scullery, hoping she'd forgot the window-latch. She never forgets the front door, but is very prone to forget that window-latch. She had, so I rose the window and climbed in the house that way with my heart in my mouth by now. Then a voice sounded out of the silence."

"Her?" asked Milly.

"No, 'Satan.' I took the blanket off his cage and he was very pleased to find his day had begun and surprised to see me and not Aunt Mercy. Never a sound of her yet, so I called out loud and said the hour was late and I'd fetched in with her green stuff for the lobster. And the raven shouted too; but not a word in response. Then 'Arthur' mewed at the door and a cat never mews without

a reason and a most horrible terror overtook me that Aunt Mercy had fallen a victim to bad characters in the dead of night—her being just the one to court such things."

"No signs of violence, Linda?" I asked.

"All orderly as usual, so I nerved myself and mounted the stairs and knocked at her bed-chamber door. Thrice I knocked—each time louder than the last—but no answer. Naught but a feeling of gathering emptiness, in the house and in my stomach. I never felt so empty before. So I put up a prayer for support and opened the door and went in. But nothing looked to be out of the way at all. There was her huge shape lying in the bed curled up and comfortable as need be. Then I pulled up the blind and let in the sunshine and confronted her. The first thing I saw was my birthday present—the bottle of rum—on her bed-table along with a tumbler and a jug of water. The bottle was three parts empty. Her last act had been to take it to bed with her."

"Her 'last act' you say?" inquired Milly with a hungry look in her face. "Not only just dead drunk?"

"Far more than dead drunk," answered Linda. "She wasn't drunk and she wasn't asleep. I went to her and found her eyes wide open—fixed upon me as I thought; but they were sightless. There was a film drawn over them, they'll never flash no lightning at nobody again. She was dead and her candle burnt down to the candle-stick beside her."

"Gone! Really and truly gone!" said Milly.

"Yes," answered Linda. "Gone, and well content, seemingly. She looks a happier corpse than ever I saw her to look in her life. Calm and ten years younger too. Almost a touch of triumph on her old face and them deep lines scored across her forehead all ironed out you might say. She could have been quite a religious woman by the look of her."

"Triumph on her face?" asked Milly. "Fancy that!"

"She was triumphant over death," explained her sister. "Just a passing flash, like a rainbow. But it don't last. Soon fades away."

"Are you positively certain she was dead, Linda?" I inquired.

"Oh yes—very dead, Pete," she answered. "You couldn't be so cold as what Aunt Mercy is unless you was dead. The North Pole's self ain't so cold as death. But then a hideous thought came over me. My brain was in a proper whirl of excitement by now and out of control for the moment and I shook with terror."

"Well you might, I'm sure," I agreed; but Milly didn't see anything hideous about it.

"Why hideous? If she's triumphed over death, then it's our

turn to triumph over life for once," she said. "What did you want to shake for?"

"I wasn't thinking of us; I was thinking of David," explained Linda. "My mind suddenly fixed on him and his lobster and I got a feeling that she might have cooked it last night, only to find too late it was a wrong 'un. And then I pictured Doctor Meadows probing into Aunt Mercy and finding venom inside her and the lobster giving witness and Dave on trial for his life very likely."

"Steady yourself, Linda, my dear," I begged her. "Stuff and rubbish!"

"I'm glad to say it was stuff and rubbish," she replied. "But I had to prove it. I rushed to her larder then and thanked God to see Dave's great fish gazing down at me from the shelf and his whiskers twirling as if he was alive yet. Then I took in the milk, and went straight off to widow Manlove—her that nurses the sick and lays out the dead. I told her Aunt Mercy was gone in her sleep without a pang and asked her to run and do the needful. Which she did the moment she'd swallowed her breakfast. She said that to pass over in your slumber was a merciful reward kept for saints as a rule and not usual with characters like Aunt Mercy. And next I went off to Dr. Meadows with the news and catched him in good time before he went on his morning round. I drove along with him back to 'Sunshine Lodge' in his dog-cart, and there was Manlove at work already. The doctor didn't stop above three minutes. He looked down upon the body and just hummed to himself as he often will. He sang under his breath and it sounded like 'Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum.' Then he said, more to himself than me, 'So the old buccaneer's gone at last!' After that he told me he wasn't surprised and pointed to her birthday present I'd given her on the bed-table. I'll give you the 'all clear' to-morrow,' he said. 'No need for an inquest. Just alcoholic poisoning and nobody to blame but herself.'"

Then Mildred gave evidence of the shock she had suffered and turned to Linda. "I've got my palpitations," she told us. "You wouldn't think good news could bring 'em on, but it has."

Milly was subject to the flutters now and again and they always kept a medicine bottle on the dresser against them, so Linda fetched it now and poured a drop.

"Good news is more palpitating than bad," she explained, "because it's such a lot rarer. Drink it down, Milly."

Mildred gurgled a bit and gave her sister credit.

"Well might you forget the laundry and abscond," she said. "Where did you run next?"

"I went off to Mr. Blades and told him the fatal news. He'll be up to take his measurements this evening."

"We don't like Blades at Birch Hanger," I said. "When old Sarah Blanchard died, he annoyed father."

"Nobody likes him," agreed Milly, "yet if there's one man that ought to ooze sympathy it's an undertaker, I should think."

"No sympathy there," went on Linda. "All he said was that it would need to be an outsize casket for such a large defunct and asked if it was to be elm wood, or if we felt disposed to run to oak. And I said we mustn't be hurried over a nice thing like that."

"Certainly not," added Milly. "Everything has got to be done seemly and David will decide."

"For elm if I know him," said Linda; and then I reminded them of their position.

"You're in the news now," I told them, "and must behave accordingly. When do you count on David coming in?"

"He knows by now," said Linda. "I went down to Mrs. Ford, where he lodges, and she reckoned he was due off the sea. He'll be here any minute."

Mildred had been thinking about the dead woman and her palpitations were passed.

"I lay she went at the zero hour," she told us. "All Gollops go at the zero hour, when the sun's farthest away from the universe—round about one o'clock of a morning. And if I'd known her climax was so close, I wouldn't have spoke some things about her I did speak yesterday."

"More wouldn't I," said Linda.

"What's in reason when folk are alive, may sound a thought harsh after they're dead," I agreed.

"You can't be too careful what you say to the aged ones—whether it's true or not," pointed out Linda. "We'll hope she's as peaceful as she looks."

"She's opened the way to peace for us anyway," said Milly.

"Peace, if not plenty," agreed her sister.

"Plenty too, it ought to be—what would be plenty to us, anyway. We've earned it."

"In justice, yes; but she never set great store on justice—to say kindly," declared Linda.

Then there was a tramp of feet—pretty brisk ones for him—and Dave came in.

"What ho!" he cried. "Is the glad news true?"

"True by this hand: she's gone," so Linda told him.

"Died at zero hour, David—on the turn of the night—just a natural, human death," said Milly.

"First natural, human thing ever she did then," he answered.

"Alcoholic poisoning and all quite in order," explained Linda, while David couldn't hide his delight.

"You'll have to take her passing in a proper spirit, Dave," I warned him.

"Rum was her proper spirit. Rum conquered her as I always knew it would," he replied; then Linda also urged him to be serious.

"We should all battle to see the good in her now, David," she said. "Never visible to the naked eye, yet hid deep down somewhere for certain."

"As for the good in her, that all depends upon her dispensations. I never saw a mite of good in her," replied old Mercy's nephew. "But it may have crept into her will."

"I do hope for all your sakes it has," I told them and prepared to go.

"Seeing we were everything she'd got, we've a right to feel hopeful," declared Milly.

"Hopeful, yes, and more—confident," answered her brother. "She's been our star of hope for thirty years and you've got to consider common sense and her views in general. She'd never have left a penny to Charity, nor any good causes. She hated 'em. Why? Because she swore to me that they who left their money to pious uses were fools. 'When such people die,' she said, 'their good intentions are always set at naught to suit the greed of the living. The dead may feel kindly to the poor, but the living never do.' That's what she said."

"Easy to steal from the dead, if you'd sink to such a thing," I agreed. "I hope you'll have a proper just will, David."

"The question is how far our expectations will travel along with her dispensations, Pete," he replied.

"Not very far, I'd say," remarked Linda.

"On the face of it, granted, but you're dealing with a friendless woman without a supporter but us," explained David. "About as welcome as winter anywhere, and she knew it and gloried in it. There's nobody but us, because any trustable friends she may have had are all dead and gone years ago."

He turned to me.

"This is private," he said, "but I've no objection to letting you in on it if you'll keep it to yourself, you being my sisters' friend."

I promised I would and, feeling the confidence a compliment in

a way, stopped to listen. Then he unfolded how his Aunt Mercy had stood so far as he knew.

"You can fix her money at round about five thousand pounds," he began. "That was the figure she named to me long since. Years and years ago, and she was drunk at the time, or next thing to it. She wouldn't have squeaked about her money else, but plenty only tell the truth when they're half-seas over. Then there's her goods and chattels and house and grounds. And me being the head of the family, they're mine."

"You're head of the family now no doubt," admitted Linda.

"Certainly I am," he said, "but I've thought this out I may tell you and I shall be prepared to let you and Milly live at 'Sunshine Lodge' along with me and look after me till I ordain to marry and have a wife at my command. Then you'll clear out, because she's little likely to care for any other woman in my house but her. The premises won't want much done to them. Aunt Mercy always kept everything tip-top. Just new wall-papers and trifles like that. And I needn't to have a gardener once a fortnight like she did; because you two can look after that and dig and delve and grow the vegetables I favour. And I'll pay for the seeds."

I felt pretty indignant with Dave to hear what he'd planned for his sisters and Mildred took up the subject pretty quick, because she was indignant too.

"So that's what you think?" she asked him. "We've been at her beck and call, granted, but we wouldn't much feel like being at your beck and call, so you'd best to know it here and now."

And Linda showed a spark of spirit also.

"Who's worked for her and toiled for her all these ages past? Us, or you? Who's earned her money? Us, or you, Dave?" she asked.

"As for the money, I wouldn't put no claim to all of it for a moment," replied the man. "You must have your dip; but the head of the family always comes first and he's got to look to the upkeep of the property."

I thought they all sounded a lot too hopeful and ventured to whisper words of caution.

"She wasn't an ordinary woman, so she's not likely to have drawn an ordinary will," I said.

"And no need for us to bicker until there's anything to bicker about. She's got to be buried first and she always wanted to be buried among the ancient Gollops," said Linda. "Sexton told me once they were as thick up there as sardines in a tin."

"I'll see sexton come presently," decided David and Linda's mind ran on to the details.

"Nobody's going to send flowers, of course," she foretold, "but there ought to be a trophy on her coffin from the family."

"We can break off a bit of the white lilac," suggested Milly.

"Black pansies were her favourite flowers," said Linda, "and black her favourite colour for that matter. That's why she neighboured with her raven and always wished 'Arthur' was a black and not a tabby."

"There won't be many to see her go to ground," said David. "She wasn't one to get much of a rally at her grave-side."

"Mr. Forrester ought to come, when you think of all the bottles of liquor she bought off him," I suggested.

"And it was mine that broke the camel's back, poor soul," added Linda.

Then Mildred turned to another question of the future.

"What shall you do as to a name-stone over her?" she asked her brother.

"Depends upon the will if there's going to be a name-stone," he answered, but Linda protested at that.

"All the Gollops have a name-stone. 'Tis their last dignity to have one," she told David. "There are slates up there far older than Queen Victoria."

"And so crooked as a row of drunken men," he replied. "Naked grass is more dignified than a lop-sided slate."

"You feel there's few don't deserve a stone," explained Linda. "They keep the dead in mind, Dave, and if they say anything it's friendly, so long as the words are plain and anybody left to read 'em."

"Stuck up to save the face of the corpse most times," he answered scornfully. "The living knows the truth about 'em, and the next generation won't care a button whether they were good or bad."

"Stone or none, she's got to have a coffin, and is it going to be oak, or elm, Dave?" asked Linda. "Mr. Blades was wishful to know and you can't wait for the will to decide that."

"Elm," he said promptly. "Oak's only an advertisement for the mourners and no honour to the dead. Blades makes a lot of fancy money out of the people's grief; but he won't make none out of ours. Dignity at a funeral—yes; but no fireworks for Aunt Mercy."

I didn't like such sentiments myself, but they were natural to a grasping man like David Gollop, so I took another line to distract his mind.

"I was thinking of 'Arthur,'" I said. "I suppose you girls will take on the cat for a memento of Miss Gollop and watch over him?"

"No," replied Milly. "We both have a strong feeling against ats and pets in general, and 'Arthur' knows it. He can settle with Irs. Mutters. She was always his home from home when things got oo hot for him."

"And touching the raven, he ought to be remembered," I reminded them.

"I'm not likely to forget him," said Dave. "You can leave Satan' to me."

"Not if she's left him to somebody else," I suggested. "She set high store by him."

"He'd be what you call a 'white elephant,' Pete, black though he is," said Mildred. "He eats so much as a growing child."

"Best cast him loose, to make friends with the other birds," advised Linda, who was always the most merciful one in the family.

But Milly doubted.

"No decent fowl would want to neighbour with him," she said.

"He might pick up with another raven and have the time of his life," I suggested.

"You can leave 'Satan' to me," repeated David in a dangerous tone of voice; but I ventured to say how the bird had always been very dear to his aunt.

"Dear at any price to anybody," he said, which was a pretty good joke for him and we all laughed. But Linda protested.

"I'm sure we didn't ought to hear a cackle on our lips to-day," she told us,

Milly had been running on again in her mind and spoke of when the funeral was over.

"We must show everybody we understand," she explained. "There ought to be a sit-down meal at 'Sunshine Lodge' after. That's only right. We must bury her with a ham and cold chicken and a bottle of brown sherry wine for the mourners, Dave."

"Only there won't be any mourners," said Linda, which was a facer for Milly.

"More there won't," she answered. "I never thought of that."

"I'll be a mourner if you like," I told them. "She was always very kind to me."

"For what she could get," declared David. "We might ask Lawyer Townley and give him a snack before he opens the will."

"You come, Pete. You're our best friend, be it as it may," begged Linda, and I said I would certainly come to the funeral if no more. Then David showed how his thoughts were expanding and how he was expanding with them.

"I'm the big noise for the minute," he announced, "and quite equal to handling the job as you'll find."

"Our standards of living ought to go up in future," agreed Milly, who was always very practical, and Linda shared her opinion, but felt a doubt.

"Life will widen out for all of us, though how we shall set about to widen it, I couldn't say," she remarked. "If you've been called to live on a three-penny piece ever since you was born and planned small according, it will ask for a lot of thought to start planning big. Shall you go down to water any more, David, or feel yourself to be a gentleman at large as they say?"

It amazed me at the time how they took the future for granted in their simple fashion and I stared at Linda.

"I shall be a gentleman at large for a bit," answered her brother, "but not in Beesworthy. I ain't going to start spending a fortune on free drinks here. You can be a gent at large all right without chucking your money away on other people."

"Wouldn't be a gent at large very long if you did," I said.

"How will you pleasure yourself, Dave?" asked Linda, and he thought he might run down to Plymouth for a while and watch other people working.

"Would you like for us to come with you?" she inquired; but he declined.

"That wouldn't suit me," he told her. "You two can bide here and mop up at 'Sunshine Lodge' and get ready for the sale."

The women didn't count their chickens before they were hatched, quite as certain as their brother.

"Do we carry on at the laundry?" asked Linda, and Milly doubted.

"The trouble there would be that if we started being ladies at large, they'd sack us," she explained. "I'd dearly love to throw it up, just to spite the manager."

"Spite's a luxury, and we don't know yet for certain if we can afford to be spiteful to him," admitted Linda.

"Stick to the wash-tubs till you know where you stand," I advised, and David agreed to that.

"That's right. Same as I shall stick to *Saucy Sally* till I buy a better boat presently," he said. "Honest work's its own pleasure."

"It may be in a new boat," answered Milly, "not in a laundry. You never heard a washer-woman gloating about her honest work. What I'd like best in the world would be a nice little cosy shop-of-all-sorts."

"Not all-sorts, Milly. A shop for Berlin wool work and such-like

a ladies' shop with knitting materials and poker work and uminated texts and coloured note-paper."

That was Linda, but we didn't agree.

"There's far more to a shop of 'all-sorts,'" said Milly, "and there e no ladies in Beesworthy in any case."

"Better take comfort in the present before you start to arrange the ure," I advised, and they agreed that showed good sense in me.

"We can sum up what we've got and be thankful so far," admitted illy. "To me the first blessed thing is that we shall never, never have list to that awful fiddle again. Never again! What I've suffered d the perspirations endured and the struggles to keep from eaming!"

"Music always makes you go hysterical," so Linda pointed out.

"Music!" cried Milly. "If that was music, then a pig being lled is music. And she knew we hated it and scraped on and on to rture us."

"Other folks' sufferings always tickled her to death—poor dear," lmitted Linda.

Then David spoke again of his intentions.

"I don't will for there to be one item left at her house to call unt Mercy back," he told them. "A clean sweep of everything at's marketable and a bonfire for all that is not."

That sounded hard to me but they approved.

"Same here I'm sure," agreed Milly. "I shall always smart to ink how she shortened our lives."

"Brought the grey to our heads full ten years too quick," added nda. "Nothing ages anybody like a tyrant over them."

"You'll find yourselves feeling a lot younger now you can call ur souls your own," I said cheerfully, but Linda sighed.

"Where's her soul now, I wonder?" she asked. "Such a peaceful ght, with the moon playing on the sea and the waves just whispering the beach, and Aunt Mercy slipping away like a fed baby off its other's nipple. You'd have thought, when she was called, there ould have been thunder and lightning and black clouds and the sea ging. But all peace and no saint of God ever passed to glory easier."

Which showed Linda had a streak of the romantic in her I never ıessed at. But there was nothing romantic about her brother.

"All the nastier surprise for the old bitch when she finds where e's got to," he said in his brutal way.

There came a knock at the door then.

"Who's that, I wonder?" asked Mildred.

"Somebody sent to know why you ain't at your work most like," plied David.

"Sympathy beginning to pour in, I expect," thought Linda, and Milly agreed there might be a few crocodile tears shed. Then they went together to the door and, when they were out of ear-shot, David turned to me.

"Don't you let 'em launch out into a shop, or any foolery like that, Pete," he urged me. "They're not built to make money in a shop. If they want to be notable women, let 'em cleave to any capital that's coming their way. Your security depends on your money-value and only the secure get any respect from anybody."

Then they came chattering back, and with them they brought the lawyer.

"Here's Mr. Townley been so kind as to call on us in our bereavement," said Milly, and the visitor spoke.

He was very popular with the people and held trustable by all. He would come to Birch Hanger sometimes for a chat with father, and he did our business and always had a brace of partridges or pheasants every autumn. He was a good-looking, middle-aged man with very bright blue eyes and a pair of sandy-coloured whiskers—old-fashioned, even in those days, and not to be seen in our times. Mr. Townley wore knickerbockers of Scots tweed and a tie of blue spotted white. He always rode a "safety" bicycle—a machine that had lately been invented and come into fashion.

He turned to David now and expressed his sorrow.

"Just heard the sad news from Dr. Meadows, Gollop," he said, "and thought I'd look in for half a minute. A shock for you, I'm afraid."

But Dave wanted no sympathy and didn't pretend he did.

"A death in the family is all to the good now and then. It clears the air," was what he said, and Mr. Townley showed himself surprised.

"Well, that's one way to look at it no doubt," he admitted. "I think the old lady knew her sands were running out and her life drawing to a close. It's good to hear she slept away without pain."

"Be pleased to sit down, Mr. Townley," begged Linda, and I rose to go. Milly, however, restrained me. I think they wanted the lawyer to know their aunt had friends besides him. Indeed she said so.

"She can bide, can't she?" asked Milly. "A very good friend to Aunt Mercy always and a good friend of ours, too."

"Certainly Mrs. Appleby can stop," he said. "A good friend to everybody, like her father is. I've been acquainted with Pete since she was a toddler and never met a nicer one, for all she's turned into a married woman nowadays. I've heard your aunt give her a good word, which was rare."

I got red as a rose before such praises and felt very uncomfortable

sat down and shut up. After that David went on, naturally not g attention drawn off himself.

"Our relative," he said, "was a bad old woman—shifty and cruel l no bowels of compassion in her. So enough said. She led a oked life."

Mr. Townley opened his blue eyes to the full and put up his right id to his right whisker and kept it there.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I've known the old lady a good many rs now and always thought her quite the most amusing and original ny clients. A survival from more spacious ages than this."

"An 'early Victorian' I've heard her called, Mr. Townley," said da.

"Bless you—far earlier than our gracious sovereign," he answered. An Elizabethan from the days of Drake and Raleigh—even earlier an our Golden Age in truth. A cave-woman! A primitive! s, a troglodite!"

We stared to hear such things. My learning took me back to ueen Elizabeth, but I'd never heard of nothing to be called 'a oglodite.' "

But he talked on.

"She and I had many a rare tussle in our time," he declared; ut Miss Gollop knew she couldn't hoodwink me—also that she uld trust me."

"They untrustable people always do know where they can put eir own trust," said David grimly, and the lawyer agreed.

"Very true. Rogues are often excellent judges of honesty," he plied, and then returned to their aunt.

"But you mustn't call Miss Mercy a rogue. Primitive—that's the rd. Tricky, crafty, wilful, combative and fond of telling absurd s, but often only for the fun of them when she tried to get a rise t of me. Disposed to break the law if she didn't like it, perhaps; t she was a law to herself."

He stopped and laughed—a big, hearty laugher he was—and then ıcluded his remarks on his old customer.

"A real museum specimen if you took her the right way and kept ır patience. I shall miss her a great deal. You won't have ided anything about the funeral yet, but let me know when you I must certainly attend if I can manage it and I'll see you people erwards and give you all particulars."

"That will pleasure us very well, Master," answered Milly. 'e'll gather at her house and listen to you open out the will after 's gone to ground."

"Good. I'll come; but I shan't open the will, my friend, because

there's no will to open," said Mr. Townley; which shook them up a good bit.

Dave was speechless but Milly voiced all three.

"No will!" she cried out. "Why, our aunt told us only yesterday when we were with her for her birthday, how she'd made her dispensations. And then she threatened to change them if we didn't carry on to suit her."

The lawyer laughed again.

"She would!" he answered. "Yes, my dear, plenty of dispensations I can assure you, and I've got them—every one of them—in her own handwriting for all of you to see."

"And why no proper will?" asked David.

"Because she wouldn't make one and, try as I did, I couldn't prevail. She was positive that to write your will is to sign your own death-warrant. One of her many ridiculous superstitions. She swore she knew countless cases where rash men and women had done so and died inside twelve months."

"She told me the same," I said after Mr. Townley had finished. "She warned me against any such thing if I valued my life. She believed in all manner of dark truths hid in the past and overlooked nowadays by silly fools who fancied they knew better than the dead."

"Well," he went on. "Miss Mercy made her wishes exceedingly clear, as she always had the art to do."

"Of course we trust you, Mr. Townley," said Linda. "Who wouldn't?"

"You safely can," he assured them. "Dishonest lawyers are not as common as some people imagine. But there is no need to trust me. Miss Gollop has left very definite instructions and spent a good deal of time and thought upon them."

"We all know her penmanship," so Milly told him. "Like a spider trying to get home after he's dropped in the ink-pot."

He laughed at that and said it was a very good description of her writing.

"And now good-bye for the present," he finished up. "Some of you had better go and stop at 'Sunshine Lodge' till the funeral and look after her pets."

"Linda and I will go, Mr. Townley," promised Milly. "Good-bye, Sir, and thank you for calling."

"Good-bye, Master," said David, and Linda offered to show him out.

"'Tis a great land-mark gone, Mr. Townley," she told him.

"Indeed it is," he replied. "A link with the vanishing past."

When he was off, Milly showed a good bit of indignation over one hing he had spoken.

"He didn't ought to have called Aunt Mercy a museum specimen," she said, "—cheek, that was."

"What did he mean?" asked David. "What is a museum specimen, Pete?"

"Mostly things got so old as to be curiosities," I explained. "When father took me once to Exeter museum, there were museum specimens by the score—all out of date now. Even Egyptian mummies, older than Exeter itself, from thousands and thousands of years ago, all wrapped up in their withered grave-clothes—hideous affairs—yet fearfully exciting to see. But of course Mr. Townley didn't mean your Aunt Mercy should be put in a glass case for a show."

"Then what did he mean?" asked David.

"A piece of impertinence, whatever he meant," declared Milly, "and I don't think none the better of him for it."

"What I took most count of was his telling about no will," said David. "If there's no will, there's no security."

Linda came back then.

"He's trundled away on his bike," she told us. "I tried to get a few particulars; but he won't throw any light till after the funeral."

"They hate divulging—they lawyers," explained David. "A proper passion with 'em to keep you guessing about the secrets of the dead."

"He's a most honourable man, and my father's friend, Dave," I said.

"He may be," he replied, "but he ought to have got a proper, lawful will out of her—signed and sealed and witnessed. He should have frightened her into it if need be."

Linda sniggered at that.

"Whoever frightened Aunt Mercy?" she asked.

I felt in my bones by then it was more than time I faded away. So I hopped it, and nobody asked me to linger because they had important affairs to occupy their conversation now.

At home I told Tom the story and he was a good bit interested but advised me to keep out of it and not push in where I didn't belong.

"They are a stupid lot," he said, "and, finding themselves on the centre of the stage for a minute will go to their heads very likely."

"In a manner of speaking, it has," I told him, "because to take everything for granted like they do, and feel sure she's left them her fortune—just because they were her only relations—looked to me like counting your chickens before they are hatched. In plain truth she didn't care for them very much, Tom."

"How do you know she didn't?" he asked.

"Firstly from what Linda told me about the party yesterday," I said. "She related faithfully all that had happened and it didn't show up her opinion of any of them in a very favourable light; and secondly from what Miss Gollop said to me when I looked in with some eggs for her yesterday, after the party was over and they'd gone home. She spoke of them with much disfavour and told me Dave was a bad-mannered, lazy lout and, when I stood up for his sisters, she said they were a tiresome, fussy pair of nincompoops, without the brains of a titmouse between them."

"There you are then," said Tom. "Don't that show they are pitching their hopes a lot too high? Townley's kept the old woman out of many a scrape, so I've heard my father say."

Tom had his own affairs to think upon just then, because he was in the process of selling *Petronella* for a new boat. There was nothing wrong with her, but he wanted something bigger and faster. He couldn't buy a new one, however, till he had sold her and now I spoke of a possible chance to do so.

"It's agreed, seemingly, that Dave's *Saucy Sally* is on her beam ends so to say," I told him, "and he grants himself she's worn out and past praying for, so if he does get his aunt's money, you might do a deal in that quarter."

"I have it in mind," he said. "His boat's no longer seaworthy and I hope he will come into enough to buy mine. In fact we are talking about it."

CHAPTER IX

MICAH WIDECOMBE came in to see us that evening I remember. Micah was Tom's best friend and they were greatly attached to each other. Everybody liked him and he had the name for a good and able shoesmith and most kind-hearted chap; but when I say that everybody liked him, I have to remember one who didn't like him well enough at any rate to marry him. After our wedding, young Widecombe, who stood best man for Tom, fell in love himself with a very nice and comely maid, daughter of my father's own cowman at Birch Hanger. Ellen Coaker she was called and a handsome piece and wife-old and oncoming. But she couldn't see herself taking Micah and he was a lot cut up when she refused him for the third time of asking. A placid and steadfast man as a rule and cheerful by nature, yet his failure in love damped him down a great deal and we saw a lot of him at the time, because he drew a sort of

left-handed comfort from telling all the details of how he lost her. However he had long got over it by now, and only a month before Miss Gollop died, when Ellen left Birch Hanger and married a baker at Kingsbridge, such was Micah's generous disposition that he made her a little, bright, brass horse-shoe for luck and came to the wedding, which was celebrated at Birch Hanger, out of respect for our cowman.

To-night Micah quite agreed with Tom, that the Gollop family might be taking too much for granted. He was a big, powerful man, three inches taller than my husband, with a round, full face, brown eyes, a close-cropped beard and a slow, deliberate way of talking and not much one for a joke, which suited Tom, who wasn't either.

"There's rumours flying as thick as snow-flakes in Beesworthy," said Micah. "Mercy Gollop was never known to tell about her secret affairs to anybody. Took a pleasure in keeping the people guessing what she'd be up to next. I went into 'Fisherman's Arms' for a beer at noon to-day and John Forrester had heard the news and seemed excited about it for some reason."

"Because he'll lose a tidy good customer," I suggested.

"No, Pete, he wasn't cast down. The fact that she'd gone appeared to suit him very well. But we shall soon know the truth without a doubt. I was up over putting the latchet of her gate to rights for her a bit ago, but she didn't converse. Her raven was doing the talking, following her like a dog. A very fine bird, and knowing I'd take out my gun sometimes, she mentioned him and said he could always do with a rabbit. 'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, Miss Gollop, I doubt not he can and I'll remember him.' She hoped I would."

Micah asked me if I meant to go to the funeral and I answered I should do so and take a trophy to put on the coffin.

"It's going to be elm, however," I said. "Dave was quite clear about that."

"What became of your Barnevelder eggs for her birthday?" asked Tom.

"Milly's looking after them to-night, and the lobster too," I told him. "Dave wants to sell it for a museum specimen, which Mr. Townley said was the way you ought to look at Miss Gollop."

We heard a day or two later that the dead couldn't be slipped in with her family as she hoped and her grave was dug with the newcomers in ground down by the bottom hedge. There was a larger company at the burial than you might have expected and I took it for a sign of grace.

"It shows," I said, "that she may have done a kind act now and again and wakened friendly thoughts."

But Dave kept up his unkind opinions of his aunt even after she was in the earth.

"It shows there's always plenty of folk can find time for amusements they need not pay to see," he answered. "They were only there to behold an out-size coffin."

"And Blades will charge according no doubt," said Linda.

I'd stopped with them to see the grave filled in, because the girls wanted me to do so, and they were very grateful for the fine flowers I'd taken. They had made a wreath of the white lilac from "Sunshine Lodge," and I'd got a lot of roses and pinks from home; and Mr. Townley had sent a dashing cross of geraniums, but he was only in the church for the service and hurried away afterwards. There's nothing in my experience looks more utterly miserable than a new-made grave and even Milly and Linda shivered a bit when sexton had slapped up the mound and said that was all for the present. We placed the flowers on it and Linda spoke.

"My first care is going to be to plant black pansy roots here," she told me, "that being her favourite blossom."

There was a famous yew tree of age beyond human memory hard by where they buried Miss Gollop and Milly commented on it.

"That's the owl's yew," she said, "and the churchyard owl hollers there six nights out of seven. That was her favourite noise after her fiddle, so she'll have that too."

"And more music yet," added David. "Sexton says the frogs harbour here a lot of a spring night. They come in scores from the water-table over the hedge and croak on the graves. There's complaints about it from the cottages round about, but none from underground."

He was glad the ceremony had passed off well, but refused, once and for all, to join his sisters in the mourners' pew next Sunday.

Mildred spoke of the service.

"His reverence took it terrible fast," she said, "might have gone a thought slower."

"He didn't miss any—that was to his credit," thought Linda, "and the folk were very nicely spoken after it was over. They didn't pretend anything and Mrs. Manlove hoped we'd be well repaid for all our faithful service."

"The people well understand what you've been to her, Linda," I said. "No woman ever had such nieces before."

It was agreed I should go in the afternoon with them and hear the dispensations. They made a point of it because Mr. Townley had told them I was remembered. It rained at the funeral but not heavy enough to be troublesome and cleared off by noon, and at

three of the clock I met them again by the gate of "Sunshine Lodge" and we went in together. It seemed creepy to know the old lady was sped, but none of them felt it so. The blinds had been drawn after the funeral started, but now Milly pulled them up and asked David whether they were going to have Lawyer Townley in the house-place, or the parlour.

"In the parlour," he said. "The man will expect it."

All old Mercy's chiefest treasures thronged in her parlour. She was a great one for going to sales when they happened within reach of her, and if any joanies or gim-cracks took her fancy, she'd bid for them and buy them cheap, because few cared to bid against her having a feeling they might bring down her wrath upon them if they did. Pictures and china and queer ornaments she'd gather and get pleasure from, like a magpie brightens its nest with any odds and ends he can gather up to put in it.

"Smells mousey," I said to Linda when we went into the room and she told me it always did.

"Along of her passion for keeping the window shut, Pete," she explained. "She'd often set a trap for a mouse in here on 'Satan's' account and never failed to catch one. They are his favourite delicacies."

"Light a spot of fire and open the window and get some air in the place," ordered Dave. "This chamber and everything in it properly reeks of Aunt Mercy—everything to the beastly wall-paper."

The room, so crowded with the things she had bought and hung up and arranged round about, seemed a proper curiosity shop. Shelves she'd got put up to carry her treasures and the mantelshelf was devoted entirely to blue, willow-pattern crockery.

"As for the wall-paper, she took undying pride in it," said Linda. "'Tis a pattern of bats flying across the moon—a most unusual design and she'd never seen the like in any other house but her own."

"Only a female with bats in the belfry would have hung it," declared David. "That's one thing that goes. I won't have no dead hand stretched over me when I come in residence."

"She was most proud of her pictures, I think," I told them. "She took me all round them and let me hear what she'd paid for them. She said pictures always went cheap at sales—especially the melancholy ones, which she preferred herself."

Then Mildred went over them, while Linda took off her hat and jacket and laid a fire.

"That's Admiral Nelson, dying in his last hour of triumph on the *Victory* battleship; and that's Napoleon being took off to his island; and that's Queen Victoria reading the Bible to a shepherd on his

death-bed," said Milly, "and this fearful affair is the execution of King Charles the First, just before he had his beautiful head axed off. Awfulest thing ever done in England by all accounts."

"He asked for it and he got it," so David told us, being not much one for royalties at any time.

"He was a nicer man than Oliver Cromwell, whether or no," I said, remembering the history I'd picked up before my marriage; but David knew no history at all and didn't argue about it.

"I shall sell all these pictures," he announced.

"Not that grand stag staring at us," I advised. "That was always her noblest picture, David. 'The Monarch of the Glen.' "

"Yes," said Dave. "It goes. I'm the monarch of this glen in future."

You couldn't but laugh to picture David a monarch of anywhere.

Linda asked for a match and then wanted something else.

"I was wondering if you'd see your way to letting me have her family Bible, Dave," she said. "Aunt Mercy would open it now and again—not so much for the contents, I'm afraid, as to look at the Gollop family tree and trace out the branches,"

"You can have it, Linda," he promised. "You girls can have everything I leave over that don't mean money.

His sister thanked him and said she'd write off Miss Gollop in the family tree, now she had fallen.

"The fire won't smoke to-day," she foretold, "because the wind's north."

Then a thought struck her.

" 'Satan's' hungry, I expect," she said. "There's half the rabbit left over that I gave him yesterday. His cage is in the shed, David, and you'd best to feed him. The cat's gone."

"Townley's due half-after-four, so I'll smoke a pipe and poke round the grounds," he answered. "I shall plant a few fruit trees next autumn where the flower-beds are—plums most like—and I may set up a flag-post, because a flag looks well flying in a garden."

"There's the raven calling now," said Milly.

"Shall I make Mr. Townley a dish of tea?" asked Linda, but Dave forbade it.

"No," he answered. "Townley's coming on business only. No need to distract his mind with tea. As a matter of fact I took the tea-caddy to Mother Ford yesterday for my own drinking."

Then he marched off.

"High-handed, ain't he?" twittered Linda when his back was turned.

"A bit above himself if you ask me," replied Milly. "I shouldn't

favour living with him. Terrible untidy and none too clean in his habits."

"If he once gives up the shell-fish he'll sweeten off," explained Linda. "But I hope he'll go on working. He's got no gifts away from fishing and, once ashore, he'll spend half his days pub-crawling. You know what that means, Milly. He'd shorten his life."

Milly did a rather shocking thing then. She was above herself also I thought, for the funeral had excited them all, and now she laughed out loud to our surprise.

"What's to laugh at?" asked Linda.

"Just a comical idea," she said. "It don't do to be too hopeful and we've had our graveyard luck, but if Dave was to go first and we came into 'Sunshine Lodge' after all—what a scream!"

Linda joined in her laughter and I could see that both were working up into a high pitch of nerves; which they did do with a very startling result, for now they came across Miss Gollop's fiddle—dumb for ever. Linda picked it up where it was lying on the little sofa.

"I fetched it in here yesterday and my fingers itched to smash it and my feet itched to tramp on it," she said.

"For two pins I would," cried Mildred taking it from her and shaking it, as if she was shaking a living creature, by the throat. "Devil—devil—but it won't come over us no more!"

"How would it be? For revenge—for justice you might say?—But no—we didn't ought," whispered Linda.

"Why not?" asked Milly gripping the instrument and her eyes flashing. "Who's the worse or the wiser? I'd love to! I want to! I will! I'm going to do it, Linda!"

"Don't you let your passions run free, Milly," I urged her, but she wasn't in a temper to take warnings.

"It ain't passion—it's righteous vengeance—payment for untold torments," she hissed out and, to my amazement, her sister backed her up.

"Naked justice—if you put it that way," said Linda, scowling at the fiddle with an expression I had never seen before on her face. The strings twanged under Milly's rough handling as if the poor fiddle was crying for mercy; but it didn't get any.

"Hark to the filthy thing! Look at it grinning in our faces as if it was alive! Would you, you beast?" shouted Milly, and crashed it down on the ground. Then she said she had broke its neck and they screamed with queer, horrid joy. It was a terrible thing to see them both out of hand together and on the edge of hysteria, as if some bad spirit had got in them. Such a sight I never saw before. I cried to

them to be sane, but it was too late. The demented pair were outside control now and they stamped on the fiddle, which made what you might call dying squeals.

"Justice—justice!" screamed Linda. "Conquer him—conquer him, Milly!"

"His perishing yells that was. There! He looks a pretty fool now, don't he?" cried Milly, and the pair of 'em danced a sort of Red Indian war dance on the remains; and then Linda fetched the fiddle bow and snapped it across and danced on that, too.

"You'll get your palpitations, you idiot!" I bawled at Mildred, but she was past hearing—panting with her exertions by now and laughing so shrilly as a neighing horse.

"Matchwood—kindling wood—finished!" she gasped. "That's done me good!"

"Me too—hateful wretch!" gasped Linda, and they tramped till the poor ruin hadn't got a sound splinter left in its body.

"Years of torture! Years of torture paid for at last," gurgled Milly; then she shut up and Linda came to her senses and marked the mess they'd made. Their rash deed lay all over the carpet—a fearful sight—and as they recovered, Milly sat down on an easy chair and spoke as soon as she could.

"Gather him up and feed the fire with him," she told her sister. "Better Dave don't see it yet. Aunt Mercy said her fiddle never smoked. He'll smoke all right now."

They shrieked with senseless laughter again and Linda collected the fragments and piled them on the fire.

"True Gollops we are," said Milly, "though she always told us we were not. That shows what we're made of—the fighting sort!"

She was still off her head and I felt it no use to be angry, nor chide her till the fit was over. But I mourned to think of such a wilful piece of work.

"True Gollops—oh yes," agreed Linda, who'd gone from red to pale again and was wiping the perspiration off her face. "Only true Gollops would have done it. Justice—plain justice. Pick up that bit over there, Pete."

"Aunt Mercy always swore that, when she was took, she'd come back by night and play on her fiddle," said Mildred.

"She won't find it if she do," giggled Linda, and they both cackled again.

We'd made all decent and tidy five minutes later and presently, just before the lawyer was due, David came back laughing and pleased with himself too. He saw they were both tolerable warm and the fire we had built blazed bright.

"Mustn't be too cheerful," he said. "Watch that fire. It's halfway up the chimney."

Then he laughed in a self-satisfied way and I asked him how the garden was.

"What plums do you favour for planting, Dave?" I said.

Then the thing he had been doing came out and we were too astonished to say a word for a minute.

"I've started by planting something else, Pete. I was laughing just now," he said, "because I've killed 'Satan.' Yes—got my revenge at last."

Milly and Linda both stared at him, then both stared at one another and then, after a silence only broken by the crackle of the fiddle's remains, Milly spoke.

"Killed 'Satan!' Never, Dave!"

"All over," he said. "Croaked his last croak. Ate his last rabbit. Insulted me for the last time. I've wrung his neck and buried him under the Brussels sprouts."

He laughed in triumph and showed his teeth, and Linda said, in a queer, awed sort of voice. "We understand that, don't we Milly?"

"True Gollop that was," answered her sister. "Self-respect is everything."

"Right," he agreed, "and I've got it back at last. And if I'd met him, I'd have served 'Arthur' the same. Vermin—that's what they were."

"You needn't trouble for him," explained Milly, "'Arthur's' gone. When he found Aunt Mercy was off the map he settled down for good with Mrs. Butters and I've told her she can keep him."

David went on about the poor raven as if he was a hero to have slain it.

"I've long had the will to finish that damned bird," he said, "and only waited for the power."

I had it on the tip of my tongue to tell him that he was a dirty, mean coward and I'd never speak to him again; but then I felt a creepy feeling that his feeble mind had worked like his sisters'. They had all been smouldering for years under fancied persecution and let a fiddle and a bird win hate that no reasoning creature would give to any but another reasoning creature. In a way I felt frightened of them for a minute; but I kept shut and wished the lawyer would turn up.

Then Mildred mentioned him.

"And don't you be too easy with Townley, David," she said. "Remember he called Aunt Mercy a 'museum specimen,' and he

called Linda 'my dear.' We don't want no patronage from him. You are his employer now and see he don't put on any frills."

"Fear nothing as to that," he answered. "I'll learn him his position double quick if he doesn't know it."

"His father was only a shop-keeper at Kingsbridge," went on Milly. "He rose to be a lawyer, granted; but we go back a long sight further than he does."

"Them as pay the piper call the tune," answered David, and then we heard Mr. Townley's bicycle bell and David went to greet him.

When he was out of the room, Milly spoke again.

"Don't say a word as to the fiddle if it enters into the conversation, either of you," she said, and Linda showed her spirit was changed over that ugly business.

"Not me, Milly. I almost wish now we'd put a curb on and never done it," she half whispered. "Now I'm cool, I'm sorry. We let our passions run too high."

But Milly was not sorry at all.

"No such thing and don't be a fool," she barked out—almost as Miss Gollop used to bark.

And then her brother fetched in Mr. Townley. He'd put on his black for the funeral, but changed into his tweed knickerbockers again now. He carried a leather case for his papers and greeted us kindly.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said. "All my sympathy. You stood up to your ordeal with great courage, I'm sure."

"Us Gollops can stand up to anything," replied Milly—in a rather shaken voice all the same, because the sudden and cruel end of "Satan" had been a startler for both of them.

"I saw you at church, Mr. Townley," I said.

"Yes, Pete. I attended the service, but had to hurry away afterwards and couldn't go to the grave-side," he explained.

"Will you please to take this arm-chair by the fire," suggested Linda; but he wouldn't do that.

"What a blaze for a June day!" he said. "No, no, I'll sit by the window."

Then Milly nearly let the cat out of the bag, but saved herself in time.

"It was the old fid——" she began, then cleared her throat. "Some sticks I threw on to clean the stuffy air," she went on. "There's always a smell of toad-stools in this chamber—couldn't tell you for why."

Mr. Townley looked round at the curiosities.

"Your aunt thought the world of her parlour," he reminded them.

"Liked the house-place best to live in, but always delighted to show me round this room and point out her bargains. My! What a collection it is."

"It was her pleasure to swoop off to a sale and pick up something new—mostly junk," said David; but the lawyer warned him.

"Some of that old blue china on the mantelpiece may represent quite good money, Dave," he pointed out. "People who understand will pay well if it's the real thing. Don't give them away."

David grinned at the suggestion.

"I'm giving nothing away," he replied. "Be just to yourself before you're generous to other people."

Mr. Townley looked at him as if he didn't like him.

"I see," was all he said, then changed the subject.

"I'll sit here beside the window. Nice view and a glimpse of Start Point. Now then—here we are," he began. Then he opened his case and fetched out a lot of papers.

"Everything in her own hand. Satisfy yourselves as to that," he said, then spread the documents on a little table he'd drawn to him, while the Gollops went over to look at them.

"That's her writing—to call it writing," admitted David.

"Aunt Mercy's scrawl sure enough, Mr. Townley," agreed Mildred.

"A lavish caligraphy, but perfectly legible and absolutely clear as to meaning and intention," he told them. "You three, sole remaining relatives may regard yourselves as the deceased's lawful residuary legatees with precisely similar claims upon the estate. But the fate of residuary legatees can be disappointing sometimes when there is no residuum."

They'd taken seats round him and now David jumped out of his as though he was shot.

"No residuum! No residuum!" he shouted. "What are you talking about?"

"Lor, Mr. Townley!" said Mildred; then he reproved her brother.

"Mend your manners, Gollop," he ordered sternly, "and don't bawl at me. I didn't say there was no residuum. I merely told you that it can be disappointing when there is none. You are faced with a residuum, but not with her total estate as you anticipated."

"And why not her total estate?" asked David, who had got pretty edgey by now.

"For the reason that she disposed of most of it during her lifetime."

David had risen and still kept his feet.

"Mr. Townley," he said, "before this hand I'll take my oath she

told me she was worth five thousand pounds. She'd got that money stored up."

"When did she tell you that?" asked the lawyer.

"Years and years ago; and the money ought to have goodied a lot since then."

"What she told you was probably true enough when she said so," answered Mr. Townley, "but it is not true to-day, for a very sufficient reason, my friend. Don't be entirely downcast: I'm not suggesting you're forgotten and will not have something to be glad about; but nothing like thousands of pounds. There is no question of 'Sunshine Lodge' either. You can check all I have to tell you and satisfy yourselves as to the truth. First the money. Ten years ago now—when she was seventy-four years old, Miss Gollop bought an annuity."

"What about us—her lawful heir and heiresses?" asked David, and the lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"I must be frank," he said. "When she mentioned you people—very seldom—it was with distaste. At any rate your existence did not deter her from purchasing an annuity for which she paid five thousand and five hundred pounds. At her advanced age that simplified life, saved her trouble, banished any further anxiety as to what to do with her money and left her plenty of income."

"Be that as it may," said David, "she couldn't play no tricks with this house, and she couldn't take it with her."

"She couldn't blew the house and grounds, Mr. Townley," suggested Linda.

"She could, and she did, my dear," replied Townley in his fatherly way.

"Blew the house and grounds!" echoed Mildred.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. That was a long time ago. She decided, at her age, she might just as well knock the full value out of her property. That was her own expression. And she set about to do it in her own way."

"She might have left us to decide what we wanted and what we didn't want," sighed Linda.

"She might, but you see you don't enter into her main plans," explained Mr. Townley, "except in connection with other lives, for which she cared far more than for any of you. Granted her attitude may appear unseemly and unusual. Indeed I pointed that out; but she stuck to her intentions and they indirectly embraced you all. Everything is there for you to read, mark and digest."

They made no answer to this and he spoke again.

"Your aunt was what you call an 'Individualist,' and she gratified her own wishes without considering what others might think, or feel,

or have to say. When she built on that scullery and put a bathroom over it——"

Once more David let his growing indignation make him rise and he interrupted.

"An act of madness that was," he growled out. "What did a woman eighty years old want a bathroom for?"

"And never took a bath more than once a month after all," added Milly; but I was glad to hear Linda stand up for the dead.

"Old people don't want a bath so often as others," she said. "Their nature don't call for it."

Townley listened to them patiently and then went on.

"Well, your aunt added to the value of her property and knew that some day, new-fangled folk with a weakness for a bathroom might follow her. But the building pushed her for money, and so she raised a mortgage. George Forrester of the 'Fisherman's Arms' advanced five hundred pounds at five per cent. and got a safe security for the cash. Twenty-five pounds a year she had to pay him and——"

Mr. Townley broke off and laughed his big laugh very heartily.

"What's funny?" asked David.

"We don't see anything to call amusing, Mr. Townley," backed up Milly.

"Not so far," added Linda.

They were all rather shocked and so was I, because, of course, I could see by now things were running terrible contrary for them.

"No, no—you wouldn't," he said; "though I did. Your aunt knew that for any honest purpose she could trust me; but she also knew that if she contemplated rascality, she could not. I made that clear long ago, after hearing some of her suggestions. But soon she began to hate paying Forrester interest on the mortgage—said it irked her to part to the man, she being his best customer most likely. So it occurred to her that she would raise another mortgage on 'Sunshine Lodge' from parties who knew nothing about the existing one. That would give her some more ready money. She didn't need it in the least, but the idea took her fancy and she set to work behind my back and very nearly succeeded in committing a criminal offence. By a lucky accident, however, I got wind of her little game, nipped it in the bud and told her I would keep her out of jail as long as I could."

"She was always a pirate at heart," said Mildred.

"An excellent description," agreed Townley. "Well, the situation developed rather quickly and before long she ceased to pay Forrester any money at all and was in his debt to the tune of a hundred pounds. So he came to me and announced that he was going to foreclose and put your aunt in the street. I tried to make her see sense, but she

refused. She'd built up a mountain of grievances against the publican now and wasn't going to be robbed of another penny and so on. Then, in her opportunist fashion and quite regardless of anything but her own convenience—remembering as you said just now, David, that she couldn't take her house with her—she cut the knot herself in a fashion to satisfy Forrester. He agreed readily enough to her suggestion and she signed an undertaking which he holds and of which you will find a copy among these papers."

"What did she sign, please?" asked David.

"I'll come back to that in a moment and explain exactly how the matter stands," replied Mr. Townley. "But now you want to know where you all come in. She hadn't forgotten you."

"And we ain't much likely to forget her, seemingly," said Dave, who was sunk into a sort of glum stupor by now.

Mildred clung in a dazed way to "Sunshine Lodge" still.

"The house ain't actually gone I hope, Mr. Townley?" she asked; but he shook his head.

"The house has emphatically gone I'm sorry to say: but there were things that Miss Gollop valued far more than her house and I will take them in order as they concern you all."

By chance he caught my eye then. "We'll take Pete first," he said. "That's quite simple and straight-forward. Your aunt liked Mrs. Appleby as far as she could like anybody, and valued her friendship and attention, so she has set down that Pete is to receive a token of good will. She is to choose any one thing in this room that she likes as a memento of Miss Mercy's friendship."

He handed a little paper to me setting this out and David looked over it and then took it out of my hand.

"Just one thing you would really value, to remember her by," said Mr. Townley.

I was all in a fluster by now with their attention drawn upon me, and then David spoke and flustered me still more.

"Goods and chattels are mine, anyway," he said, "so I must decide as to that, Pete. You might, out of your ignorance, fasten on something worth money."

"The direction is quite clear and choice absolutely free," said Mr. Townley firmly. "Choice lies with Pete and you have no say in the matter at all. Let her look round now and take whatever she likes and have done with it."

Then he turned to me.

"Don't be frightened of picking and choosing," he said. "That's what she wished you to do, and you can do it now, while I'm here."

"We wouldn't stand in your way even if we could, Pete," said

Mildred. "You take exactly what you want, my love. We share and share alike with David, seemingly, so there's me and Linda on your side against anything he might oppose."

"That's right," agreed Linda.

"There's no question of opposition," stated Mr. Townley, "and no question of the intrinsic value, since none of us know the value of anything; so go ahead, Pete."

I thought for a minute and ran my eye over the room. I wasn't liking Dave any more than he was liking me now, but I couldn't but be sorry for them all at the downfall of their hopes. Yet it so happened there was one thing I did like better than any other in Miss Gollop's parlour and, as good chance willed, David had already spoken on that subject and said clearly the object was to be sold. So I determined I'd tell them my choice, but not press it if any of them objected. I put in a light touch, too.

"You said how you'd ordained to be monarch of this glen in future, Dave, and were going to sell most everything, including the pictures, so, if agreeable to you and Linda and Milly, I'd dearly like that one—that great stag. We are terrible short of pictures as you know, Linda, so, if it isn't asking too much, I'd like that."

"By Landseer, Pete—the great artist who designed the lions in Trafalgar Square round Nelson's monument," said Mr. Townley. "An excellent choice if you ask me. A nice engraving and not worth very much money either."

The others agreed and David acted at once. He went up to the picture, fetched it down off the nail where it hung, and spoke.

"If there's a bit of brown paper in the house I'll wrap it up and you can take it right home," he said. "And mark this: I only put in a remonstrance because I thought that, with no ill intent, you might fasten on a bit of blue china worth money. And as things look to have fallen out, I know you wouldn't like to rob us of the little that's coming our way."

"Not for the world, Dave," I assured him.

Then, while Linda went to fetch brown paper from her aunt's board of it, which she knew, the lawyer looked at his watch and prepared to go on with the situation.

He uttered some preliminary words, but I didn't heed them for my mind was full of a great thought. Tom wasn't much one for pictures in a general way and well satisfied with coloured specimens from the Christmas numbers which I nailed on our walls when I could get them; but I already longed to see his eyes when he first caught sight of "The Monarch of the Glen" hanging in our parlour.

CHAPTER X

In truth, apart from my own good fortune, even my picture was faded to quite a small thing before the crash that had yet to come—not for me, but the poor Gollops. They hadn't heard yet of a quarter the misfortunes now brewing, when Mr. Townley showed how events were going to turn out. I sometimes wished afterwards that I'd taken my picture and gone before their chiefest disasters fell upon them; and yet again, in more valiant moods, I felt glad, looking back, to think I had stood by them and heard all.

"Now I am going to take you people in turn," declared Mr. Townley, "and we will begin with you, David. Miss Gollop could easily have found others to respect her wishes because they carry generous payment for services rendered after her death. So you must give her credit for letting you have first refusal."

But David properly hated the very name of his Aunt Mercy by now.

"Then I bet there's a catch in it," he answered. "What mattered to her after she was dead?"

"No catch whatever. She offers you two hundred pounds, or what may amount to rather more, in return for the task suggested. Had she known that she was going to die, there would probably have been no balance at the bank when the end came; but she did not know and was still looking ahead, as we all do. The balance is small for she lived up to her means always if not beyond them; but money is there. She invites you to support, tend, care and nourish her raven, 'Satan,' for the rest of his life, and there is one proviso. She didn't trust you, I regret to say, any more than she trusted anybody. The bird must live his full span and die a natural death, to which a professional veterinary surgeon must testify. If there were any suspicion touching his end, or if he disappears leaving a suggestion of foul play, then you would get into trouble, I warn you of that, and the funds cease. But, of course, you will be glad enough to undertake the task and earn the money."

The lawyer beamed on David, then perceived there was nothing to beam about. A dreadful moment of dead silence followed and I almost felt my heart stop. Then Milly spoke to her brother.

"There! Now you've torn it, Dave!" she said in a solemn whisper, and Mr. Townley stared at David's chap-fallen face and open mouth.

"What's wrong with that?" he asked. "You look somewhat blank, my man."

"Blank, by God!" growled out Dave. "So would you look blank if you knew what I know."

"And what do you know? Nothing wrong with the raven I hope?"

David just panted and stared before him—dumb for the minute; but Mildred spoke.

"There's everything wrong with the raven, Mr. Townley," she answered. "In fact you may go so far as to say there ain't no raven in question now at all."

"No raven in question? Where is he then?" asked the lawyer, showing a bit of feeling in his turn. "Are you telling me he has flown away?"

"Far from it. He'll never fly again," replied Linda, and then David pulled himself together and confessed to what he had done.

"He's dead. I killed him with my own hands but half an hour ago," he said, and Mr. Townley s blue eyes bulged out of his head to hear it.

"Killed him! You killed that magnificent, genial and happy bird! What on earth did you want to do such a beastly thing as that for?" he exclaimed.

"Because—because I hated it like hell, and every right to hate it," answered David. "Because I've suffered for years under the insults and torments of that carrion fowl. Birds of a feather—she and him—and when, by the mercy of her Maker, she was snuffed out, what better fit than to send him after her?"

Mr. Townley looked curiously at the speaker.

"Quoth the raven, 'never more,' " he said. "Well, well!"

Then Linda, who was always kind but not always very tactful, spoke to her brother.

"First time I ever knew you to act in a hurry, Dave," she said.

"Oh, the foolishness!" sighed Mildred.

"Foolishness ain't a crime, is it?" asked Dave, and Mr. Townley answered him.

"No. Everybody does foolish things every day of their lives; but foolishness often exacts a stiffer penalty than crime. You may commit plenty of folly and break no law, Gollop, but foolishness can punish without the aid of a judge or jury. To destroy that noble bird because you hated it was a piece of brutality, and to hate it at all worse than foolish—utterly idiotic. And now you've got to pay for your fun in hard cash, my lad."

David still had his mind on the money, however, and warmed up again.

"What about the two hundred pounds then?" he asked.

"The bird's dead—the bargain's off," was all Mr. Townley replied.

Then Mildred looked at her brother and spoke a nasty thing.

"Wouldn't Aunt Mercy laugh if she could see your face now, Dave," she said; but Linda was thinking more hopefully for him.

"If he can't have that dollop of money, sister and me can perhaps," she suggested. "Then we could see he gets a bit after all, Mr. Townley."

"I'm coming to you now, ladies," he answered. "In your case you were to receive rather more than two hundred pounds for looking after 'Arthur' and taking care that the cat lives in comfort and as respectably as you can make him to the end of his life. The same proviso as before. No violent or mysterious fate must overtake him."

"Two hundred pounds for watching over 'Arthur'!" said Mildred.

"You'll find it there in her own writing."

They didn't answer at once and Mr. Townley grew suspicious.

"You haven't killed her cat?" he asked.

"He's got all his nine lives so far," replied Linda, trying to be bright. "But we've given 'Arthur' for a gift to Mrs. Mutters."

"We must get him back now instanter," declared Milly. "To-night he'll have to come."

"He won't come," pointed out Linda. "You can't make a cat live where he doesn't want. He well knows we hate cats. They always know."

David burst out then.

"That was her damned craft and cunning—to put jobs on us we'd hate," he said.

"'Arthur' comes if I've got to drag him," went on Milly. "We do our duty by that cat whether or no!"

Mr. Townley was reflecting on "Arthur."

"A fine, striped tabby of the old, big pattern," he said. "Most amusing to see him and the raven marching along side by side behind Miss Gollop when she went round her garden."

The memory made him laugh again and angered David past bearing.

"Yes—everything seems darned funny to you—not so much to us," he burst out; and it was then I had a strong feeling to slip away and leave 'em; but Linda seemed to guess what was in my mind. She was sitting by me and now she spoke.

"Don't you go, Pete," she begged. "See it through now you're here. There can't be much more."

So I consented to stay and very soon we found there was a lot more and the worst of the storm yet to break.

"There still remains the residuum," continued Mr. Townley, "and money is going to come to the family, though in your case,

David, you certainly don't deserve it. But we will now return to the matter of the mortgage."

"What do that signify now?" asked David.

"You'll see in a minute. Your aunt possessed only one thing of outstanding and undoubted value, and, in consideration of being allowed to stop at 'Sunshine Lodge' for the remainder of her life without any further payments whatever, she bequeathed this treasure to George Forrester, the innkeeper. An excellent bargain for George and he took my advice and agreed to it."

"'Outstanding value'?" asked Mildred. "What the mischief's here of outstanding value to Forrester, Mr. Townley?"

"Her violin," he said, and the girls cried out together.

"That awful thing!" exclaimed Mildred.

"Never—never on your life, Mr. Townley!" said Linda, trying to back her up.

"Yes, indeed," he answered quite seriously. "It was given to her before your days, or mine, by an old admirer. He taught her to play it and left it to her under his will."

"We know all that," David told him.

"What you don't know I'll tell you when you give me a chance to speak," said the lawyer tartly, for it was clear he felt a good bit of dislike against Dave on account of "Satan."

"I understand nothing about fiddles," he continued; "but there are plenty of people who know all about them, and years ago, one of the summer visitors passing by this house heard Miss Gollop scraping away in the garden and came in and scraped acquaintance with her. He must have been a bold man to do that; but he was evidently a crafty man, too, for she listened to him and he interested her. I got the whole tale from her afterwards. He told her that he understood musical instruments and was in the trade. Then he praised her playing and begged to see the fiddle and said it was quite a good one—just about what he wanted for a customer. To her amazement he offered her fifty pounds and said he was allowing friendship and holiday feeling to outrun business, but would give her so much."

"Fifty pounds for that old, ruinous thing!" gasped Milly.

"Old, but by no means ruinous," explained Mr. Townley. "Since then we have learned the fiddle is a fine Italian instrument from the best period. And when she told the visitor it was not for sale, being her comfort and support and the only pleasure left to her, the dealer doubled his offer and said Miss Gollop should have a hundred pounds."

"Where is he? We must find that man," said David, waking to a pitch of excitement again.

"Wait a minute. Let me tell the story in order," answered

Townley. "Your aunt was nobody's fool. She brought her own sharp wits to bear on the situation and guessed at once that if an unknown man would give one hundred pounds for her fiddle, it was probably worth a great deal more. She repeated that the instrument was not for sale and the dealer went to a hundred and fifty. But that was enough for Miss Gollop. 'I knew now I'd got a rogue to deal with,' she said when telling me the tale, 'so I let loose on the creature and told him to go to hell out of my garden, else I'd call the police to him. He was a small, slimy little brute and if he hadn't gone, I'd have pitched him out myself.' "

Having laughed again for a moment, the lawyer went on.

"But he left Miss Gollop with something to think about, because she had no idea her fiddle was worth more than a five-pound note at best."

"No fiddle on earth could be worth that money," asserted David; but he was wrong again.

"On the contrary, some fiddles are worth a great deal more," answered Mr. Townley. "I know that now, though I didn't then. She heard from the stranger by letter when he'd gone home. He made one more offer and was prepared to pay two hundred pounds for it. But she only tore up the letter. Now she knew one thing: that her fiddle was doubtless worth more than two hundred pounds, so you see this opened possibilities, because a fine Cremona violin by a master craftsman will fetch a thousand pounds. Well, she brought me her story and I happened to have a great personal friend, a Londoner, who is an amateur violinist and a keen musician. I asked him to come down to me for a week-end and, most kindly, he came. I took him to see her and he tuned up carefully and played the fiddle as Miss Gollop had never heard it played before. For once I think she respected a fellow creature! He told her frankly that it was an instrument of Italian workmanship and very beautiful tone. He himself offered her two hundred and fifty pounds for it but, being an honest man, warned her that it might well be worth considerably more. She was gratified and thanked him; but she wouldn't part with it. She only asked him if he'd be good enough to play it again before he went. 'I always reckoned there was a tidy lot more in my fiddle than I could drag out of it,' she said, meaning music and not money. So he played again, urged her to be very careful of the fiddle and asked for the first refusal if ever she changed her mind and couldn't get a better offer. Then time passed and the matter was forgotten until her clash with Forrester, when she told him that, if he'd leave her alone for evermore, never worry her for another penny and let her have a bottle of Jamaica rum once a week as long as she

lived, then he should have her fiddle as well as her house at her death. That's how it stands, and they were both satisfied because I guaranteed to George that the fiddle was worth at least two hundred and fifty pounds. Now he would have sold the violin to my friend, or to anybody who could bid higher."

"Lord have mercy upon us!" wailed out Linda uttering her dreadful thoughts aloud. She and Milly had both gone very pale, as well they might, and I'd felt myself to do the same.

"What's the matter now?" asked Mr. Townley. "You haven't killed the fiddle, have you?"

"Yes, we have," said Mildred, confessing in a sort of strangled whisper. "Yes, we have finished off the fiddle and the bow likewise. When you said the fire was blazing a bit ago, that wasn't sticks: it was her fiddle, and we've burnt it to ashes."

There was a tragical silence with just a dying crackle from the grate. Then the lawyer woke into natural indignation again, though he kept himself in hand as he always could do.

"Burnt it! Destroyed property, possibly worth three or four hundred pounds! What a blood-thirsty crew you Gollops are! What harm did that valuable fiddle ever do you?"

"Lots of harm—yes, it has. Lots and lots," answered Milly and her voice rose to a squeak as she did so. "We've suffered unnumbered tortures for years and years from it. For hours we've been called to sit and listen to her making noises on that fiddle like the cries of people in hell fire. It's aged us; it's shortened our lives most like; and to-day we've turned on the thing and shattered it and danced on it and smashed it to kindling wood and screamed with righteous joy to do justice on it and get a bit of our own back."

Now it was David's turn and he didn't keep himself in hand by any means. He foamed at the mouth and bawled at 'em and clenched his fists as though he was minded to serve them as they had served the fiddle.

"You pair of blasted, brainless dolts!" he cried out; but Mildred didn't quail before him, though she had before Mr. Townley.

"You can stop that row," she said. "What did you do to the raven? Don't you dare to talk that way to us, David."

And Linda took her side as she always did.

"You had your revenge on her bird; so why for shouldn't we take our revenge on her fiddle?" she asked fearlessly and then turned to Mr. Townley.

"You may not understand our feelings," she went on, "but in a manner of speaking we felt we owed it to ourselves, didn't we, Milly?"

"Yes, we did," said her sister. "Owed it to our own dignity."

The lawyer looked at them with a sort of rueful grin on his stern mouth.

"The question's going to be what you owe George Forrester," he said. "It was his fiddle from the moment your aunt departed this life. You say you screamed and danced with joy—eh? Well, now I'm afraid you have got something very different to scream and dance about."

"Let 'em dance to prison—pair of lunatics!" hissed out Dave.

"The worm will turn—won't it?" asked Milly, close on tears now.

Mr. Townley didn't answer this question, but showed a learned interest in their characters.

"Very interesting from pathological and psychological points of view," he said. "Scientific people would explain it all to their own satisfaction no doubt. But meantime there's George Forrester. He's going to be rather trenchant about this, and who shall blame him?"

Linda retreated from her usual support of Milly for once.

"Somehow, at the back of my mind, even when my passions rose, I thought you might be going a step too far," she said, but her sister rebelled.

"I won't have none of that, Linda!" she cried and stamped her foot on it. "You ran loose just as mad as I did. You triumphed just the same as me and spurred me on."

Linda succumbed at once.

"So I did—so I did—God help me—and I won't deny it to nobody," she answered. "An evil spirit got in us all and lured us both—only too clear now it's too late."

"Mad—stark mad—and you'll get it in the neck now—both of you," promised David. He was tramping up and down, and Mr. Townley asked him to go back to his chair and shut up.

"You're a queer race—you Gollops," he told them. "'Primitive' appears to be the word for you as well as your late aunt. To take what you call vengeance against birds and fiddles! Are you devoid of any reasoning faculties whatever?"

Then David, calm to a certain extent again, argued upon this.

"Rage carries you far beyond reason, don't it?" he asked. "And there's times when you hate things just as bad as you may hap to hate humans, if not worse."

Mr. Townley fell in with this.

"That's true," he admitted. "Only too true."

"More shame to us of course," sighed Linda.

"More shame to all of us," agreed the lawyer. Then he fell silent a minute; but soon he perked up, pulled himself together and

grinned and spoke a thing that sounded pretty indecent under the circumstances. But it showed the bent of his legal mind and his power to throw light on a dark place.

"'Hey—diddle—diddle—the cat and the fiddle'—also the raven!" said Mr. Townley.

Milly ignored this; in fact nobody took any notice and I smothered a doubtful smile.

"We're the residuum legatees whatever we've done," said Milly, and so brought Mr. Townley back to realities as you may say.

"You are," he agreed; "but this imbecile piece of work is going to reduce your residual hopes pretty substantially I fear, because Forrester will have his pound of flesh of course."

Then Linda showed that she had quite a good brain really.

"You mean payment for his fiddle will swallow up all the money that was to come from 'Satan' and 'Arthur'?" she asked.

"Without much doubt," he admitted. "For your aunt's sake I'll do what I can and break the news to George as gently as possible. It's money, of course, not the violin, he wants."

Then he fell into silence again while his professional mind was working.

David filled the interval with a coarse opinion of his aunt.

"The old bitch wouldn't care to what depths we were sunk—curse her!" he growled out, but his sisters were still hoping for some ray of comfort from the lawyer.

"Well," he said at last. "We've all had an object lesson in the folly of foolishness, and may it profit us. Your ancestors, from the many stories Miss Gollop told me, were a prickly people and hard in the grain; but they never appear to have been foolish: that's something new for a Gollop. Lie low for the present and keep quiet—all of you. There should be a little left after the sale. I'll advertise that and push it."

Then Linda asked for support in one direction.

"George Forrester couldn't lock us up, could he, Mr. Townley?" she begged to know.

"That wouldn't help him," answered the lawyer. "He's like the late Miss Gollop—a staunch realist. I'll let you know what he'll take and try to get him in a good humour."

"You'll keep him off me and Milly, won't you?" implored Linda.

"Avoid him—all of you," he directed, "and for heaven's sake don't destroy anything else. And look after that fire before you go. You mustn't burn Forrester's house as well as his fiddle."

"I'd like nothing better than to burn down her house," muttered

Dave, who was still smouldering himself for that matter; but Milly spoke the last words before the gentleman left us.

"I'll watch over the house, Mr. Townley. And thank you I'm sure for all your sad news," she said. "Nobody could have told it kinder than what you have done."

"Thank your Aunt Mercy, my dear," he answered. "Many a hearty laugh she's given me and I shall miss her. Better stop here until after the sale. We shall meet again very soon, no doubt. Good-bye—good-bye for the present."

He went and Linda showed him out. Milly said good-bye to him, but David did not. When we had heard his bicycle bell tinkle him away and Linda came back, her brother spoke.

"'Many a hearty laugh' he's had—eh? Queer what amuses some people. Well, there it is, you girls. We've been a pack of the damnedest fools God ever fashioned and it will go round the parish to-morrow."

"But there's nothing draws people closer like knowing they've all been fools. A most human thing, Dave," said Linda.

"We've got each other, if we ain't got anybody else," added Milly.

"And you've got me," I said. "I'll stick by you and it needn't go round the parish at all. I won't say anything and I'm sure Mr. Townley won't."

"He thought there would be a residuum even yet," so Milly reminded them. "It won't lift us anywhere near where we hoped, but it might be money—perhaps even three figures."

"We can go on singing small as usual. We're broke into that," said Linda.

There dawned a faint ray of hope even in David.

"If it ran to a hundred, my share would very near buy me a new boat, girls," he told us.

"I'd gladly give my pinch of money to help you to a safe boat," said Linda. "You're the head of the family now."

"That's sense and I'll do the same," promised Milly. "You can have my residuum, Dave."

"Blood's thicker than water be it as it will," I said.

"Now you're talking sense," agreed the man, "and we'd best to practise sense in future."

"Our passions was true to nature no doubt, but didn't get us very far, did they?" pointed out Linda. "We'd best be closer friends in future, if 'tis only friends in misfortune."

Then she turned to me.

"I beg you won't divulge even to Tom what you've seen and

heard this afternoon, Pete," she said, and I promised faithful I wouldn't; but David thought it didn't matter.

"You can't hide it and no use to try," he told Linda. "Trust Forrester to blaze it over his bar to-morrow."

"We said we'd be in the news," mourned Linda, "and we were right for once."

"Trust time," I prayed them. "It's wonderful how soon happenings that bulk large for a minute are forgot."

Then David made a terrible rash suggestion.

"I've half a mind to go down to the 'Fisherman's Arms,' this instant moment and put the case to George," he said.

"For Heaven's love don't you go near Forrester," implored Linda. "Leave him to Mr. Townley."

"And you with your score running higher there ever since Aunt Mercy died, as you told us"—so Milly reminded him. "Best pay it up to the last penny before he hears this awful news; and then keep out of his sight."

Their brother agreed to this and Linda asked him to come home with them and drink some tea, which she felt to be wanting very badly, and David went with them soon after.

"Not here though," he said, "I never want to come in this house again."

"It was the Gollop in us," decided Mildred, still brooding on the past. Then she had a wrongful idea.

"See here, you two," she suggested. "How would it be if we poked round and picked up a few things before we hand the keys to Townley?"

"Not on your life, Mildred!" cried out her sister. "We've had our lesson."

Then I offered to give them back my picture.

"I don't like to take it now," I said. "You've all gone through a very unpleasant afternoon and so have I too, being your friend, and I won't take my picture if you think I should not."

But even David said I could hold on to the "Monarch of the Glen," so then we started to go off, me with my gift from the dead and Linda carrying the family Bible.

"There may be some surprises hid here yet," said Milly going reluctantly; but Linda told her they had got surprises enough to last a life-time and David ordered us all away.

"Come out of this damned den and give me some tea," he said. "We'd best to look forward now. You've been tolerable good sisters to me and it will serve to draw us closer together if you saw your way to helping with a new boat presently."

CHAPTER XI

WHEN you take such a bird's-eye view of your own life as I am doing now you need to fix your mind on the high spots and overlook years when you jogged along in the wind and the rain, or rested in the sunshine, without any masterful event to remember, good or bad. And after the adventure of the Gollop family, I don't find myself to be quickened about anything particular till the next winter. Then two events happened to me one on top of the other, one being exceedingly sad and the other propitious in the opinion of Tom and myself.

When the story of "Sunshine Lodge" came to be told and the dust sank down, Dave came out of it the best. Of course there was no hiding the sad details in a place like Beesworthy and they made men and women laugh for a month of Sundays; but my friends weathered it. Milly and Linda were taken back at the laundry, where they had to run the gauntlet of a lot of fun at their expense, and Tom sold his old boat to David, because, thanks to Mr. Townley, the Gollops came off with a bit more than a hundred pounds after all was over and George Forrester satisfied. Two hundred and fifty pounds was what he got instead of the fiddle and, of course, the house and grounds for his daughter.

Now that she was gone, you heard all manner of views concerning old Mercy, but only one as I remember always mentioned her with glee and won a laugh out of his memories. And that was her lawyer—the best friend she ever had. I met him once and fell to talk, then minded what I was out for and declared I must be quick.

Then he fell to laughter.

"I told Miss Gollop I must be quick once," he said, "and this was what she replied. 'Be quick be damned!' answered old Mercy, 'We ain't here to be quick: we're here to be thorough, and who can be thorough if their one silly fool's thought is to be quick? All this quickness is ruining the people and will ruin the country'."

But my husband's father, Matthew Appleby, took no pleasure in his memory of the ancient woman.

"You don't speak ill of the dead for choice," he told us once, sitting with me and Tom, the day's work done, "but truth wouldn't hurt her now and the truth of that woman was ugly. When she heard a good action reported of a neighbour, it was always her terrible habit to pin a bad motive to it—a fearful affliction that. Vain people are mostly jealous too, because it irks them to hear another

good deed whatever. Goodness made her malignant and she never could bring herself to believe in it. That made enemies, but she was so built she better liked to make enemies than friends."

Mr. Appleby was getting old himself now and, being cleverer than Tom and me, we found him difficult sometimes though we loved him well. He had mostly given up his old activities and found his pleasure in reading and sometimes going out in the boat to help Tom draw the pots. And a curious thing, though neither of them knew it, his father's strong views were built into Tom and I'd often seen them working. My husband was a great observer of the Sabbath and would not have his boat touch water, or even let a pot lie under water, on the Seventh Day. He lost by that and when I told him that, so long as he wasn't working himself, what did it signify, he answered that to let his pots be working in the sea while he was at church ashore would be hypocrisy and contrary to his ideas of religion. And my father-in-law greatly approved and held it much to Tom's credit.

Mr. Appleby was apt to get uncomfortable ideas out of his books and worry other people with them. He'd follow his thoughts down blind alleys and then ask all manner of questions to which nobody had any sort of answers—a tiresome habit. But it never troubled my own father, who was Matthew's life-long friend. They'd chatter away by the hour, because father was slacking off from farm work himself little by little and leaving Birch Hanger more and more to my eldest brother, Aaron; and on a Sunday night, I remember we all took supper together at the farm and the two old friends entered upon one of their famous arguments and puzzled over things which didn't seem much to matter to anybody else.

It happened his reverence, Mr. Tozer, had preached a funeral sermon that morning on a very pious old man well known to all. Andrew Cawsland he was—a famous Christian in his day, who had rung tenor bell for scores of years at church and, as Vicar's warden, done much good work.

"A curious thought got in my mind when I heard Tozer telling about dear old Andy's virtues," began my father-in-law. "His wife died in child-bed when she was nineteen and he twenty-two at the time, so she passed over as a girl and Cawsland went on till he was ninety-five. And if you subtract nineteen from ninety-five, you get the sum total of seventy-six. There you are then. Ivy Cawsland will be an angel of nineteen and Andy go to his reward seventy-six years older. Yet, among the old man's highest hopes, was the certainty they'd meet again and be all they were to each other when boy and girl. But how should that be, Moses?" he asked my father.

"When Andy comes before her once more, he'll be ninety-five, and what's the value of ninety-five to nineteen?"

"I'd say she must have pushed on too, angel or no angel," answered father. "Time can't stand still even in heaven, Matthew."

"My dear man, that's just what it does do!" explained Mr. Appleby. "Time doesn't run in the world to come and the angels don't grow old, else the place would be chock-a-block with doddcrers."

"And no marrying up there in any case," I said, just to show I read my Bible with the best.

But they didn't heed me and father was thinking what to reply and Matthew waiting to see how he could get out of it, as he did when he'd cornered him at a game of draughts.

At last father spoke.

"A nice question sure enough," he said. "How would it be to get a professional opinion from an expert? Put it to his reverence, Matthew."

"I've done so," answered Mr. Appleby. "Tozer's too young to be an expert in any case, but he's always got the same answer to my propositions. He doesn't know a thing touching the hereafter—admits it quite frankly. He's never one to hedge; I'll say that for him. 'With God all things are possible,' he always answers, 'and it's vain to draw the veil between us and the mysteries of heaven.' That's true, but it takes you nowhere."

"You look into things too curious, Dad," said Tom. Then we left them to it and went to talk to my mother who never entered into controversy on any subject.

And that brings me to the next two great things now rising up in the pattern of those faraway days. One concerned her, Susan Blanchard, my dear mother, and the other had to do with me. It was now she began to go back in health, but months went by before she would own to it, because she hated to talk about herself and was only concerned, after father, with her children and grandchildren. And now father found out that mother was short of health so drove her into Dartmouth, because she wouldn't see Dr. Meadows. He was the doctor of all of us, and the whole village for that matter; but she'd never seen him on her own account and didn't want to begin doing so. So she went to Dartmouth and father came home looking ten years older and mother resigned and peaceful as usual. She sank down the hill slowly and grew thinner and hard to feed. Her spirit never quailed for a moment and she did her work and plodded on, but father told us she couldn't recover and was beyond the salvation of doctors now. So the cloud grew heavy and we all knew we were going to lose her, That was how it stood with mother.

The other thing happened to me and while the future began to shut down on dear mother, it opened out in a very joyful manner for me, because I found myself with child. It is a great moment in any woman's life to discover she is about to lend a hand with the next generation, or at any rate so it was in mine and I gave myself some airs about it and counted myself in the forefront of progress and worthy to be took more serious than heretofore. Tom was very pleased also and the folk very glad. I gave great delight to Linda Gollop by telling her she should be a godmother, because she was a most humble woman always and never more so than after the family mishap. For some reason my promise lightened her lot and showed, when anybody is what you might call down, how little will serve to hearten them. It pleased mother very much also when she heard I was going to have a babe.

"I doubt I'll live to welcome it, Pete," she said "but I'd dearly love to if God wills."

I reckoned the best course was not to hurt her by dwelling on that and went on talking as if I hadn't heard.

"We've thought a lot already about what name we shall call our child, Mother," I told her. "If it's a maid, then I am wishful for her to be named 'Susan' after you, but Tom inclines to my name. He's funny. He says 'Petronella' sounds like a flower of some kind and it's his favourite name anyway."

"Quite right," agreed my mother. "I was always addicted to it myself, I got it off an old gravestone."

"Then, if the baby should hap to be a boy, I wanted him to be called 'Moses' after father; but Tom doesn't feel drawn to that somehow. He reckons that 'Moses' is too heavy a name for any new-born infant to carry. He proposed 'Arthur,' and I said that was Mercy Gollop's cat's name and I couldn't feel I'd like it for our eldest. Tom is mostly against Bible names either, because if a child turns out a scoundrel——"

But mother stopped me there.

"No child of a Blanchard and an Appleby will ever prove to be a scoundrel," she said, "but I hope it may be a man child. I've always set good store by Tom. He's honourable and straight and hard-working."

"All that," I answered, "and I properly laughed at him when he made the suggestion we might have a wicked son."

So time passed for mother and me, and presently it looked to be a race between us whether she was going to pass on first, or live to see my baby. She grew to be a bed-lier presently and we all knew she was near her end because it couldn't be hid any more. She had her

friends in to tea one by one and said "good-bye" to them in her quiet, dignified fashion. Father held up pretty well and Tom's father, with his queer ideas, said that it was the way of nature and he wouldn't be surprised if my mother was to go the very same minute as my baby was to arrive.

In truth mother went two months before my turn came and she slipped away as she had lived, without any stir or fuss. Just here one minute with seeing eyes and all her senses about her, but too weak to do anything but breathe, and then gone, with one hand between father's hands and the other in mine. At her funeral came Blanchards and Westaways and kin by marriage to both families—a large gathering, let alone many friends and admirers of mother to pay her the last honour in their power. High summer it was and a fine day and a sit-down funeral feast at Birch Hanger afterwards. A cruel blank she left behind her. Tom's father as I remember saw a good deal of the widower after mother was gone and my father wouldn't see anybody but him and Mr. Townley for a long time, though a most sociable man as a rule. But there was that about Mr. Appleby and Mr. Townley to comfort him, each in his own way. Parson tried to; but father said he was too young as yet to understand a heart that had lost its partner after the cream of a lifetime with her. He said that Mr. Tozer was a good companion for the cheerful, sporting side of life, but not for a bereaved husband.

So mother passed over and I remember how Matthew Appleby told one of his queer things while she continued to be father's only subject of conversation.

"Susan will always be like a beauteous fly in the amber of your memory, Moses," he said, and my father held it to be a most romantic thought and often repeated it in future time.

There was a ray of cheerfulness just then, for now, after a year had passed and the Gollops were mostly forgot, Linda had an idea to set a stone on her aunt's grave. Neither David nor her sister would subscribe a penny towards it, but she had a bigger and more forgiving heart than them. She went to old Marl, our gravestone cutter, and sounded him as to what the price of a simple monument, with name and date and no more, might haply come to, and Mr. Marl told her he could furnish a headstone two feet above ground and durable for a five-pound note. So Linda was fired to try to collect the money.

"It ought to be in reach," she said, "and I've been thinking where I might make an approach, Pete. There ain't many offer much hope, but I'll give a pound out of my money. Dave and Milly won't part, needless to say."

The other thing happened to me and while the future began to shut down on dear mother, it opened out in a very joyful manner for me, because I found myself with child. It is a great moment in any woman's life to discover she is about to lend a hand with the next generation, or at any rate so it was in mine and I gave myself some airs about it and counted myself in the forefront of progress and worthy to be took more serious than heretofore. Tom was very pleased also and the folk very glad. I gave great delight to Linda Gollop by telling her she should be a godmother, because she was a most humble woman always and never more so than after the family mishap. For some reason my promise lightened her lot and showed, when anybody is what you might call down, how little will serve to hearten them. It pleased mother very much also when she heard I was going to have a babe.

"I doubt I'll live to welcome it, Pete," she said "but I'd dearly love to if God wills."

I reckoned the best course was not to hurt her by dwelling on that and went on talking as if I hadn't heard.

"We've thought a lot already about what name we shall call our child, Mother," I told her. "If it's a maid, then I am wishful for her to be named 'Susan' after you, but Tom inclines to my name. He's funny. He says 'Petronella' sounds like a flower of some kind and it's his favourite name anyway."

"Quite right," agreed my mother. "I was always addicted to it myself, I got it off an old gravestone."

"Then, if the baby should hap to be a boy, I wanted him to be called 'Moses' after father; but Tom doesn't feel drawn to that somehow. He reckons that 'Moses' is too heavy a name for any new-born infant to carry. He proposed 'Arthur,' and I said that was Mercy Gollop's cat's name and I couldn't feel I'd like it for our eldest. Tom is mostly against Bible names either, because if a child turns out a scoundrel——"

But mother stopped me there.

"No child of a Blanchard and an Appleby will ever prove to be a scoundrel," she said, "but I hope it may be a man child. I've always set good store by Tom. He's honourable and straight and hard-working."

"All that," I answered, "and I properly laughed at him when he made the suggestion we might have a wicked son."

So time passed for mother and me, and presently it looked to be a race between us whether she was going to pass on first, or live to see my baby. She grew to be a bed-lier presently and we all knew she was near her end because it couldn't be hid any more. She had her

friends in to tea one by one and said "good-bye" to them in her quiet, dignified fashion. Father held up pretty well and Tom's father, with his queer ideas, said that it was the way of nature and he wouldn't be surprised if my mother was to go the very same minute as my baby was to arrive.

In truth mother went two months before my turn came and she slipped away as she had lived, without any stir or fuss. Just here one minute with seeing eyes and all her senses about her, but too weak to do anything but breathe, and then gone, with one hand between father's hands and the other in mine. At her funeral came Blanchards and Westaways and kin by marriage to both families—a large gathering, let alone many friends and admirers of mother to pay her the last honour in their power. High summer it was and a fine day and a sit-down funeral feast at Birch Hanger afterwards. A cruel blank she left behind her. Tom's father as I remember saw a good deal of the widower after mother was gone and my father wouldn't see anybody but him and Mr. Townley for a long time, though a most sociable man as a rule. But there was that about Mr. Appleby and Mr. Townley to comfort him, each in his own way. Parson tried to; but father said he was too young as yet to understand a heart that had lost its partner after the cream of a lifetime with her. He said that Mr. Tozer was a good companion for the cheerful, sporting side of life, but not for a bereaved husband.

So mother passed over and I remember how Matthew Appleby told one of his queer things while she continued to be father's only subject of conversation.

"Susan will always be like a beauteous fly in the amber of your memory, Moses," he said, and my father held it to be a most romantic thought and often repeated it in future time.

There was a ray of cheerfulness just then, for now, after a year had passed and the Gollops were mostly forgot, Linda had an idea to set a stone on her aunt's grave. Neither David nor her sister would subscribe a penny towards it, but she had a bigger and more forgiving heart than them. She went to old Marl, our gravestone cutter, and sounded him as to what the price of a simple monument, with name and date and no more, might haply come to, and Mr. Marl told her he could furnish a headstone two feet above ground and durable for a five-pound note. So Linda was fired to try to collect the money.

"It ought to be in reach," she said, "and I've been thinking where I might make an approach, Pete. There ain't many offer much hope, but I'll give a pound out of my money. Dave and Milly won't part, needless to say."

"I'll give a pound too," I promised. "If it was only for 'The Monarch of the Glen' I'd do that much."

Linda felt very pleased to hear this.

"That only leaves three pounds to gather," she said, and we ran over the likelies, and found there were but two.

"John Forrester might, seeing the customer she was," thought Linda, "but I dursn't ask him."

"I will," I promised. "He's one for a joke and he's long got over the past. I'll try to squeeze a bit out of him."

"If anybody can, you will," agreed Linda, "and there's Mr. Townley. He's the most hopeful of all, because, for some strange reason, he got more pleasure out of Aunt Mercy than anybody."

"You go to him then," I advised. "You're the one to tackle him."

We triumphed much quicker than we expected, for when he heard Linda, Mr. Townley applauded the idea and gave two pounds, and I got Forrester laughing and squeezed ten shillings out of him. That only left ten shillings more, so Linda and I made it up between us and Mr. Marl cut the stone and presently planted it, after he'd taken his usual longful time about the job. He set her name and her birthday and her deathday upon it and no more, and it looked rather an undersized little memorial for such a great big grave; but there it was along with Linda's black pansies, though they never took very kindly to the churchyard earth. Nettles favoured it more than any other herb, and folk agreed they were the properest covering for Miss Gollop.

Then, the next early autumn, my time came and it proved a parlous bad time. A most severe trial overtook me now and for once there didn't look to be any funny side to it either. In truth I fell cruel ill and had my first dose of bitter pain to begin with. I heard a lot more details afterwards than at the time, but nature went contrary and it looked pretty much to Dr. Meadows that he wasn't going to save us both, so the babe would have to go. Because, when it comes to be a toss up between mother and child, the doctor mostly puts the mother first whatever the husband may feel about it, and in my case, long for a child though he did, Tom wouldn't have taken any lasting joy of a little one that had started life by slaying me. He went through a great deal of anxiety, there's no doubt, and thanked the Lord when it was all over and I stood out of danger again and the child still alive. We were both able to breathe once more for a day or two; then things turned ugly for the poor baby and Tom's father went hot-foot for Parson Tozer one morning when my nurse warned us he should be baptized. A boy had arrived after all, and Mr. Tozer

did the needful. My baby was christened out of a soap-dish, which met his reverence's requirements, and the down on his little scalp being flame red, we called him Rufus. Dr. Meadows fought for him valiant enough for ten days and it was up and down and a time of great suspense, because now he offered to live and then he'd hover till you couldn't feel sure whether he was alive or gone. Then, lying beside me, after a bad day, towards evening time and Tom not back off the water, Rufus finished. I heard him give a little sigh and cuddled him so as he might feel my arm round him and bent to kiss his funny little face and found he was dead. I'd long known in my inner being he wasn't going to live, for I expect a mother always knows better than anybody else, so it didn't come as a painful shock to me, and when nurse returned and said I was right, my thoughts turned on Tom, because he'd always held to the contrary and believed Rufus would pull through.

"Don't you fret, my dear," said Mrs. Manlove, who was watching over me. "He's passed on, but please God, there's plenty more where he came from."

She meant well and took the baby out of my sight and I was thinking upon him and wondering where he might be neighbouring now and hoping in my mother's hands by good chance, when Tom came home. He was always cheerful in my company and a heavy weight had rolled off him when I turned the corner into safety.

"How goes it, Pete?" he asked, coming to my bed and peering for the baby.

"It's gone," I said. "Rufus is dead, I'm cruel sorry to tell you, my blessed. Went just after tea-time. Just faded out like a withered rose."

Poor Tom! I never saw a man's face fall so sudden. Properly flattened out he was, because of his undying hope that we were going to rear Rufus. I'd got over the hopeful stage myself days sooner, so it didn't floor me like it did him; but I knew that even I could do nothing to comfort him for the minute.

"Rufus gone!" he said. "Oh, Pete, I'm sorry for you, my dear woman."

"Not half so sorry as I am for you, Tommy," I answered him. "I knew he wasn't going to make good, poor lamb, but you always counted on it he would."

"I pictured his little feet on the ground and wondered what his voice was going to sound like," said Tom, showing how his thoughts had run ahead same as mine had. And when Tom's father heard this sad news, he knit it into one of his curious reflections, I remember,

and after he had strove to say the word in season and comfort the pa of us, he went on in this fashion.

"The death of a babe shows the vanity of thinking overmuc upon the vagaries of our future life," he said, "for here's Rufus, not fortnight old, yet, where he is now, he knows more about the happ land and the plans of eternity than the wisest man on earth. A lesso looked at the right way, that is."

Our baby was buried and Tom and his father and my famil went to his funeral; and Linda and Mildred also went; but docto wouldn't let me rise up yet, so I couldn't go, though Tom told me al about it.

A few weeks later, in the joy of being well again, I took som flowers there, and such was the abounding blessing of a body al right once more that my mind couldn't but share in the comfort o returned health. I dropped a tear on my baby's little mole-hill o a grave and put roses on it and then, so mighty queer is the art som of us have to see fun under the most miserable outlook, that a thin made me smile even there! It was a difference that another migh not have marked—last of all a robbed mother. But, over against th plot where Rufus lay, there towered up the great sepulchre of th lords of the manor—a lofty pile of moss-eaten stone and a huge vaul down beneath swarming with bygone quality and all locked away behind iron gates. 'Twas the contrast between their burying place and the wee pightel where my Rufus was hid that somehow brought a smile to my silly face, though it was gone in a moment and I felt enough shame to be glad none had seen it.

Everybody said soothing words about our great loss, though unaware of the truth touching my failure. Only ourselves and our families knew that. Dr. Meadows had told me and, once again, it was far worse of a facer for my dear Tom than for me, because doctor's bad news concerned the future and he had let me understand I could never bear another child. Some said the fault was his and he had got past his work, while others feared it must be Rufus had done the mischief, and I well remember feeling a bit savage and asking Dr. Meadows a silly question when he told me.

"Why do God want to bully a harmless woman like that? What have I done to be served so bitter cruel?" I said, and it was the only time in my memory ever I spoke a harsh word against my Maker; but not so much for myself as for Tom. He had set his heart upon offspring and Mrs. Manlove was quite wrong when she told me in her hopeful way there were plenty more where Rufus came from. My husband took it like the man he was and both he and his father bowed to the will of God, while I called home scores of cases where

children had proved a frightful failure, or else gone soldiering and got shot, or seafaring and got drowned, or broken their mothers' hearts in some other way, which comforted me in a left-handed fashion.

It was round about the time of the Boer War when I lost my mother and my child. And once, sitting with my father at Birch Hanger and comforting him as best I might, he branched off from our woes and cast an eye over the fighting in South Africa. Three young men had joined up from Beesworthy and were serving, but father's heart never was in the war, because he didn't hold with it, and Tom told me they said in the village that both my father and his were what were called "Little Englanders." Parson Tozer on the contrary was, I suppose, a big Englander, because he prayed for a British victory in church and held a thanksgiving service when we won. Tom was like me: he knew nothing about politics and cared less; but our fathers were of the Liberal persuasion and both very thankful when the war ended and very glad the terms were favourable to the enemy.

After father had aired his opinions about the Boer War that night, he returned to mother and Rufus again, because he'd got to companion them in his mind now and took comfort in the thought they were together.

"She'd always longed up to the end in her quiet way that she'd be spared to see your child born, Pete," he said. "And now I like to fancy she herself is training the little boy instead of you. Such things are mysteries no doubt."

"Nobody knew better how to bring up children than mother," I said.

CHAPTER XII

I MARKED lasting changes in my father after mother died and Matthew Appleby marked them also.

"Her steadfastness," he told me, "acted like a sheet-anchor on your father's mind, and now he's apt to drift a bit and lacks the old steadfastness. It is as if he had depended on a tonic for his support and, now the tonic is withheld, he fails of his former resolution."

I knew what he meant well enough, because only a few days before I had listened to father and Mr. Townley chatting together on a Sunday evening, when Tom and I and the lawyer all took supper at Birch Hanger. For father liked us to drop in and, about now, I think he found Simon Townley more in tune with his bent of mind than Matthew Appleby. That evening he smarted under a

reverse, and he didn't take his reverses now as he used to do wit mother to temper them. Dear father had just lost an old mare h had ridden for nearly twenty years, and he talked rather wildly abou her to Mr. Townley. Tom had gone out on the farm with my brothe Aaron, and we three sat together with my sister Phyllis. Then fathe spoke of the mare as if he was defending her memory, though non had said a word against her.

"You see it all round," he said, "the itch to run down character That horse for example: there was a horse with opinions of her own and didn't always find herself seeing eye to eye with anybody but me And why not? But, just because she showed character to have her own way now and again, what must they call it? Vice! I've heard the word used against her—'a vicious brute,' a fool once said—a mar not half as intelligent as she was, only she hadn't the power to put her ideas before him."

"Same with fellow-creatures, Father," said Phyllis. "If some people rise up and tell us we're mistook, we always think they must have a screw loose."

"We should give and take," declared the lawyer. "A man needn't be a pig-headed fool because he thinks we are making a mistake."

"A beast's instinct is more trustable most times than a man's reason," said father. "Your eyes get opened when you come to my years; then you see that we are a poor species taken as a whole and mostly our goodness and our badness of no account at all. Just dust before the broom of time—that's all we are—and little more use than any other dust!"

Father lighted his pipe then and put on his ferocious look and stared at Mr. Townley through the smoke.

"Come, come, Moses," answered the lawyer. "This will never do."

"Why won't it do?" asked father. "Tell me that. Who would choose to be a man or woman, or come into the world at all for that matter?"

"And yet somehow we never want to go out of it, once we have come in, Father," I said.

"Be quiet, Pete," he ordered. "We didn't want to come and we don't know why we came, or why we mostly mar everything we put our silly hands to. It's borne in upon me, worse and worse every year I live, that we're poor things."

Losing his mare had made father lose his balance also.

"Be it as it will," I said, "we're the best things we know and the pride of the universe, Dad. There's nothing better this side of heaven, anyway, and you ought not to run us down—a good Christian like you"

Mr. Townley also stood up for the human race.

"That's right, Pete," he said. "We're the biggest noise in the only world we know, and so ought to take ourselves seriously."

"We may be the biggest noise," declared father; "but we are also the ugliest noise in my opinion."

Phyllis calmed him down and reminded him of the fine folk he had known and the good ones still going strong.

"You must not lose faith in your brother man, Moses," begged Townley, "else he'll lose faith in you."

"You mind that, Father," I added, "you can't start blotting your own copybook at your time of life."

"Faith moves mountains, I'll grant that," said father, "and I've proved it to my own satisfaction; but I find it a lot harder to put faith in my fellow-creatures than what I used to do; though I deny, here and now, that ever I took a single step to make them lose faith in me."

We left it at that and, seeing him satisfied with himself, if none else, Mr. Townley began to praise, not the high and mighty ones, but the meek and humble—ourselves in fact. He always liked working-men and women for choice and had a very high opinion of the labouring classes. He held himself one of us for that matter and always said it was quite an accident he had come to the black-coated work of a lawyer. So now, to stem father's harsh words against humans in general, he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket-book and read it out to us.

"Good and bad in every class, Moses, but take this to your comfort," he said. "Your class and my class stands high in the esteem of the world at large and wiser men than we are have praised us hundreds of years ago, my friend. I came upon these words long ago and often cite them when I hear labour slighted by town folk. A sage called Cato wrote this about us long centuries ago. Which shows that the folk of the land were noted for their quality even in his days."

Then he read out these words to father, and I copied them down for Tom.

" 'An agricultural population produces the bravest men, the most valiant soldiers and a class of citizens the least given of all to evil designs.' That's the opinion of a great thinker, Moses, and worth remembering, because as true to-day as when it was written," said Mr. Townley; and father granted that town people were a lot more given to evil designs than farm labourers as a rule.

"We've got bigger hearts for each other than what they have," he said. "And another thing I've noticed: we are more generous to each other than the middle classes. The middles and uppers are

too rich mostly to be generous. They can't afford to be; but my dear wife told me once that she'd known the very poorest still willing to help them with no money at all."

"And who more generous than Mother?" asked Phyllis.

This talk put our father in good temper, as he always showed himself when the conversation turned to mother. But he was never the same after she had gone. You felt he didn't care overmuch to go on living afterwards. Indeed, Matthew Appleby always said that father's own days were shortened by ten years when his wife went and that, with her alive, he might have carried on to eighty or more, instead of stopping as he did at seventy-one.

Life drifted along with us all bringing nothing to name, but establishing facts here and there. For example it looked clear that my husband's hope and ambitions were not going to be fulfilled. When we first met, he'd always counted on being an employer some day and owning boats—big trawlers in the Brixham fishing fleet perhaps; but, as time went on, his ambitions petered out and he grew content and never showed disappointment. He made a tidy good living and worked hard and steady to do so; but his dreams in youth didn't haunt him as he went along through his thirties, saved money in a small way and found his happiness in his home along with me. He wasn't one who showed his true self at first sight and, if you didn't know him, you might have thought him rather a glum build of man. His turn of mind, like his father's, was serious. He never was a laugher and, just because he wasn't, he'd often make me laugh. He worked on me for great good, however, and made me more apt than I was by nature to take serious subjects in a serious way. I loved him heart and soul and not once in all our united life did a cloud blow up between us, or hard words pass. I knew him so well and was always quick to admire his hidden goodness. A most steadfast man with very high opinions of his native land, like Simon Townley, and proud of being an Englishman and ever thankful that he hadn't been born of any other breed.

He was mighty sorry when Queen Victoria passed away, I remember, and took it a lot to heart. He'd just bought a dog and I set store upon the dog, because it made him a good companion on the water and lightened his mind ashore. A bright and adventuring young dog is apt to do that for the most serious people. But the death of our old Queen cast him down, for he said we were little likely to have such another monarch in our lifetime, not knowing, of course, what a popular and well-loved sovereign the new one was going to be. But he highly approved of King Edward, because that King happened to be a sportsman among his other gifts and dearly loved the sea.

There was a Beesworthy man, Braddock by name, who served in the King's yacht, being greatly skilled in yacht-racing and well worthy a place upon her; and Braddock had seen and been spoken to by His Majesty, so when he came home after the season had ended, he would often drop in and tell about his work on the *Britannia* which interested Tom.

The dog gained on him too, as dogs will, and from being indifferent towards the creature, I marked how, little by little, it won ground and ended by conquering Tom and taking its place in his scheme of life. He was a wire-haired fox-terrier of a breed that's gone out of fashion now, and the creature had what Tom lacked, because it could see a joke and would joke himself in his doggy way and make me laugh. He loved for me to laugh and had a particular bark now and again, which was his own way of laughing. The bitter thing with pets is that they grow up so much quicker than we do and slip from childhood into middle age and pass on to old age and make an end just after our heartstrings are tangled round them. So they leave a blank crying to be filled and, though we feel for a bit that nothing can ever fill it, for most pet lovers a time comes when some small creature on four legs drifts along and creeps into their friendship and starts them all over again.

There now happened the sad affair of Tom's great friend, Micah Widecombe, the blacksmith, which we took to heart on his account, because he was a close companion of ours and we both set high store upon him. Micah, after his setback in love, finally married a promising sort of woman; but he had poor speed with her—through no fault on her side exactly and certainly through none on his. But they looked on life from a different point of view and fell apart rather soon. Micah was such another as Tom—a solid, trustworthy man with a high sense of plain-dealing but none of humour, and his wife respected him and couldn't fail to see his virtues were much better than lesser qualities, that might have made him pleasanter to live with, but not so safe. She'd married him for security, and she got it; but when her security was all right, then, as we all do, once we are properly secure, she began to look round and want something more. And there was that in her nature which presently tended to make even security itself rather dull. In fact Jane Widecombe found life to drag after two years with Micah. And, just when she made this discovery, an unmarried man came to work at the smithy after her husband's old hand retired. Samuel Peace, the new man was called—but he didn't live up to his name—not in Beesworthy. Very good-looking with not such a thoughtful, brainy face as his master; but he had just what Micah lacked—a jovial cast of countenance and

an appetite for a holiday and love of fun. A good smith and a clever man, which Micah always allowed, and he was well pleased that Sam Peace's merry outlook on life should wake up Jane a bit and make her a thought more cheerful. Nobody saw any danger in Samuel and he never woke a spark of jealousy, or a pang of fear in Micah; yet, out of sight and hid with uncommon craft on both sides, as everybody agreed after, those two had run together, like two arms of a river at waters' meet. There's no doubt nature had fashioned them for each other and Sam Peace must have fallen in love with Jane from the first time he met her; while, on her side, there was that in him to attract Jane most furious from the first. In fact mighty soon she felt that to live with Sam would be better than all the security in the world along with Micah. They wasted no time about it either and, in the upshot, that happened to prove how nature will sometimes triumph where virtue fails, and bring happiness and contentment while the narrow path furnishes nothing but growing misery for those who tread it. Even I, knowing Jane so well by now, never had an inkling of what was afoot till it happened, and more did Tom, and least of all poor Widecombe himself. Out of the blue it came and on an Easter Bank Holiday, when Samuel had taken Jane to the revel at Dartmouth and spared Micah the trouble of attending to his wife's amusement, and won her husband's gratitude for so doing. But they didn't come back to Beesworthy. Instead they sent a telegram from Plymouth so as Micah should feel no uneasiness, and told him he would hear from them in the morning. Which he did, for next day there came two letters in one envelope, because Jane had written a nice note as well as the young man.

Most kindly, well-thought-out letters they were, and Micah brought both to Tom and me and begged that we would read them. I forget how they went now, but they had taken a lot of trouble over them and both sinners felt very anxious for Micah's wounded feelings and most hopeful that, even if he couldn't exactly see eye to eye with them, he'd feel disposed to let them have their own way and take the needful steps for a bill of divorcement at his early convenience. Sam begged his old master to be under no disturbance about Jane's future prospects, while Jane explained that Sam was the one man in the world capable of making her a happy and contented person and getting the best out of her, which she always felt Micah had failed to do. Such things will happen, of course, and generally don't turn out very well, but both seemed to think the future was a certainty. Unknown to Micah, his man had already got a good job at Plymouth and he furnished particulars. It was a tidy big firm had taken him on and he was going to get better money than at Beesworthy. But the most curious

thing of all about this sad affair, in my opinion, was the way the bereaved husband stood up to it and I couldn't help admiring how Micah kept his nerve and his temper. He seemed much more surprised than angered. You might almost say he forgot to be angry for sheer puzzlement to know why Jane had gone to such lengths!

"I always fancied I suited her very well," he said to Tom. "We didn't show no visible affection to the outer eye, like you and Pete do, but we never fell out behind the scenes, or had what you might call words. She always satisfied my simple requirements and I thought I satisfied hers. And I felt pleased to see that Peace had the touch to cheer her up and make her laugh sometimes, that being the thing I lacked much power to do. But such an action as this is quite beyond my understanding, because I always thought I had the brain and saw far deeper into real life than Samuel, or Jane either; but all the time they were the deep ones!"

"So deep," answered Tom, "that they hoodwinked you and the parish. No doubt it wasn't too difficult to throw dust in your eyes, Micah; whereas to hoodwink the parish is what you might call a masterpiece of wickedness."

We sympathised with him a great deal, but the ruling emotion of his mind continued to be wonder. Not a spark of rage, nor yet any appearance of confusion. The funny thing to me—for fun would break in though I hid it—was that Tom showed more anger and got hotter than his friend. In fact I seldom saw my husband so put about. There was a laugh in that for me, but I only laughed inside of course.

Micah continued perfectly calm. He granted the letters showed nice feeling up to a point, and he gave it as his opinion that Jane wouldn't dishonour his name by living in sin before he divorced her. But then Tom pointed out he couldn't divorce her at all unless she lived in sin, because, in those days, the law wouldn't have stood for any decent arrangement; and Micah answered that if that was the case, he much regretted it.

I advised him to see Mr. Townley as soon as possible and he said that, after he'd shod one of my father's cart-horses, he would do so.

And I left them then, because I had to laugh, or die and, after the wonderful man was gone, Tom declared a bit of vexation with Micah and reckoned that he should have shown a tidy lot more indignation.

"I'd never have thought a religious man like him would have took this lying down," he said; and that set me giggling to his face, because, if your wife runs away with another man, how else can you take it in a civilised country?

"Unless Micah ordained to kill Peace, which is the last thing he would do, not being the murderous sort," I said, "then there's nothing left for him except divorcement."

"If he was a man, he'd go to Plymouth and face 'em and drag her back and learn her righteousness," he told me. The upshot was that Mr. Townley arranged the legal part and, in course of time, Jane and Samuel were married at Plymouth; and next Christmas she sent Micah a Christmas card and a letter saying she was well and thriving and liked Plymouth, and that her new husband had made his mark with his employers and stood for promotion owing to his gifts.

The rights and wrongs of the matter were a grand source of argument between my father and Tom's father. Both loved to differ and often did so, but never quarrelled. Matthew Appleby agreed with his son and thought that Micah ought to have made an effort to fetch Jane back to her duty and make her see her sins and repent; but father thought no such thing.

"Just an example of how our customs often play the mischief with decency and common sense, Matt," he said. "The woman's married and happy and Micah's free, and everybody says it's shameful. What sort of fate would have overtaken them if he'd dragged her back? Martyrdom for both. Jane would certainly have been a martyr whatever Samuel was, and God defend anybody called to live with a martyr."

Father said rash things like that. He was an uncommonly good man, but his conduct depended more on his natural straightness than upon religion and he was never so pleased with the Almighty as Mr. Appleby was.

Micah Widecombe went his way and got an old, lonely widow to keep house for him. She'd been a cook in her maiden days and found him a very nice man to feed and live with and work for; but he didn't take Jane's advice and find another woman to wed him. He said there was too much hidden in the female character for him to venture again. But Tom soon forgave his line of action and they continued to be very good friends.

We had our distractions and I mind little things, mostly pleasant, that overtook us. One was when my sister Primrose's second son came to stop with us for his health's sake. Timothy Ashbury was his name and he'd always been his grandmother's pet among my sister's children; but her husband lived at Liverpool and when the doctor told them it would set up Timothy and make his lungs stronger if he went down to the West Country and ran loose for a bit, knowing that we were free and had a room to spare, Primrose wrote to me and asked if we might be disposed to take in the boy and foster him for

a while. I was all for it and Tom saw no objection and father felt very pleased, so he came to us and found us much to his liking. Twelve years old he was and quicker-witted than most country boys of twelve, with a mind sharpened no doubt by living in Liverpool, but he loved the country and he loved the food and grew and put on weight from the minute he came to Beesworthy. A black-eyed, bustling boy, full of ideas, never tired and incapable of keeping himself clean. He proved lightning quick to pick up any habits and language he admired and he learned to walk like Tom and to talk fishing talk and boat talk. And he'd sniff the air and prophesy the weather, same as he heard others doing on the beach, and expressed hopes that he might stop with us for evermore, become a long-shore fisherman and have his own boat some day. He'd heard a lot about machines from his father, who was a master engineer, and seen the big machinery my brother-in-law dealt with, but the sea was more to him than machines. When he wasn't on it, he'd often spend an hour at the forge and blow the bellows for Micah, who liked him very well and showed kindness to him; and another pastime he enjoyed was at Beesworthy Lake, a great stretch of fresh water near by. There he'd go fishing on his own and studying the water birds that thronged it. Of a Sunday he went to church with Tom and me and Mr. Appleby; but when I asked him if he'd like the organist to try out his voice, which sounded very sweet to me, he said he wouldn't go in the choir unless ordered to it and it would spoil his life if made to do so. Timothy always went rather in awe of his grandfather, but liked going to Sunday supper at Birch Hanger now and again. He did us good and gave me something to think about, but he didn't make me want children of my own. He could be naughty in ingenious ways and was a marvel at disappearing when it was time for him to go to bed; but he showed honest sorrow after a misfortune and what troubled him more than aught else was to be blamed wrongly. He would sulk for four-and-twenty hours after a mishap of that kind, and when he relented and forgave, he'd always go to the lake and pick me a bunch of white and yellow water-lilies, to show the storm was over.

How little his best friends know what's inside a boy of twelve, or he does himself for that matter. In after years Timothy changed all his ambitions, turned his back on the sea, went into the building trade and did very well at it. We missed him after he went home, but we'd done our work for him and never heard a word more about his breathing parts. In a year or two he was talking about building houses and all for pulling our house down and building it up again better.

Then I remember Tom's old dog died, aged fifteen years, and how he said he'd never have another because he felt the loss so badly. And that was a fruitful source of argument for some time between our fathers—the question being whether it is better to win the love and honour of a dog for his life-time, or escape the grief of losing him by never keeping one at all. And my father argued better to keep them and even lose your heart to them than not. He'd kept scores of sheep-dogs, as a farmer does, but when their turn came, he generally had a young dog ready to fill the gap. Mr. Appleby, on the other hand, held there was hidden danger in making a close friend and companion of a dog, because you stand in danger of making the creature an idol and losing your hold on religion in consequence. He didn't like dogs himself and hoped that Tom wouldn't start another, and when Tom set up a little stone over his dog's grave, the old chap didn't approve of it. However, my husband started another dog six months later, and I was responsible because I bought him another with my own money and he found it waiting for him one evening when he came ashore. A cocker spaniel bitch this time and though he protested and pretended he'd never come to care for her, I trusted the dog to succeed. "Sara" she was called, and she soon played her part in adding to the contentment of Tom's life.

And now there happened the passing away of Mildred Gollop. Milly died sudden. Her palpitations had gained upon her and, when she fell ill after catching pneumonia, there came an attack just as she was thought to be recovering and she died of it. Time mellowed Milly a bit before she went. She rose to a place of command at the laundry and earned better money in consequence. She was said to be a driver, when her turn came to drive; but Linda always told me that you saw her sister's best qualities when she was at the wash-tub herself and she never shone so bright as in the laundry steam. Linda went to live with David afterwards and worked on a year or two yet, though not raised to any position of importance. She never tired of telling about Milly and the picture grew brighter and brighter with the passing years.

"I still miss her," she said to me long after Milly was gone. "I miss her same as you miss the second pillow in your bed of a night, Pete. Not vital, but robbing you of perfect comfort because it ain't there."

A far greater loss promised presently because my father was going down the hill quicker than he should. We, who lived so near him, didn't mark the change, but when Primrose came to spend a summer holiday with him and brought her two youngest children with her, she noticed it, not having seen him for more than a year. He had

altered in her eyes and lost his old, energetic habits and his interest in the farm and farming politics. He'd sleep of an afternoon and took to rising later of a morning. Then, after my sister had gone again, Matthew Appleby, his nearest friend, woke up to the truth and told my brother Aaron that changes were overtaking father. He noticed it because father lost his appetite for argument and wouldn't pursue knotty questions, which of old would waken up his opposition. Instead he let the subject go and Mr. Appleby feared that his intellects were losing their edge and his fighting spirit fading out. We all began to see it then, as if a cloud was being drawn between us and father. He seemed to withdraw himself behind it and talked a lot less than of old. I fancy things were happening to his body he didn't tell us about, but when we begged him to see Dr. Meadows, he answered that there was no need.

Talking to him once and sitting beside him, in a little summer-house we'd built long ago on our cliff field, he looked out upon the sea, which he was fond of doing, and made one of his remarks arising out of his thoughts.

"The sea's like Nature," he said. "Nature cheats us at every turn; but we can't cheat Nature. Same with the sea: treacherous—shifty."

"Nature served us bad when it drowned my little twin brother. I often think of him, Father," I said.

"We can't cheat Nature," he told me again. "We come out of nowhere into her hands and she works her will upon us. Then, when she's got all she can get out of us, she sweeps us away—all but our souls. It's a very helpful thought to me, Pete, that I've lived the cream of my life with a soul like your mother."

"Her soul triumphed over Nature no doubt," I agreed.

Then he confessed that he didn't count to live very much longer.

"Something tells some men when they are reaching the end of their tether and their oil is running low," he said, "while other men go on beyond the appointed span quite unconscious what a short distance remains to travel. They may be the happiest ones; but it's given to a mind like mine to sight the end before it comes."

I protested against such a thought, but we had Dr. Meadows to him all the same. The old doctor stood well over seventy himself, though as yet unconscious of any near finish. He'd got a partner now by name of Tanner—a very nice, modern young man; but Dr. Meadows never gave up his old patients and, so long as they were alive, they never gave him up either, because he knew their works and their weak spots in a way a new doctor never could know them.

So Meadows came and spent a long hour with father and drank

tea with the family after. It happed that father suffered a cold at the time and stopped in bed when the doctor bade him to do so, but my sister, Phyllis, who kept house at Birch Hanger, and my brother, Aaron, heard Meadows speak freely. He told them our father was losing his vitality and said to them just what I had heard from father himself.

"Your dad's older than his age, my dears," he explained. "The will to live is slipping away: it began to go after your mother died. Nothing immediately dangerous and no fear for his mind, but just the somnolent and indifferent outlook you associate with a man who has lived to be ten or fifteen years older than Mr. Blanchard. I knew his father before him and he died when he was sixty-five."

Dr. Meadows prescribed physic and advised a change, which father declined to take; but he threw off his cold very quickly and for a time seemed spryer and more himself. I think he made a great effort to waken up his interest in us, but it was an effort that tired him and didn't do him lasting good. He just changed peacefully and without any complaints on his part. Little habits dropped away; little interests faded out. He slept more and more by day; he never picked up a book for very long. You felt he was living out his own life in his own fashion unknown to us; his voice sank lower; he grew thin and stopped shaving because he was prone to cut himself when doing so. I always thought his beard was the beginning of the end of father. It changed him in a month to a very old man. The hair was white and came strong; but, after he passed out, Aaron had him shaved by the village barber, because he wanted to take his last look at father as he'd always remembered him. And I was glad that my brother ordered it to be done, for I felt the same.

A year longer he lived, and I remember one night, when old Matthew Appleby went up to the farm and took a bottle of port wine with him.

It was understood now that father suffered from anæmia, which Dr. Meadows called it, and Tom's father bought a bottle of the best that George Forrester had at the "Fisherman's Arms," and he and father solemnly drank it together. I wasn't up there that night, but Phyllis told me how, after the second glass, father cheered up wonderful and was quite like his old self and they argued away as briskly as ever they did.

"Matt said, on some count, that father was too tolerant," so Phyllis told me, "and father answered that human nature, being what it is, you can't be too tolerant. And then he said the immediate question was whether he could tolerate one more glass of Matt's port wine and Matt declared he must do so. They finished the

bottle anyway, while Mr. Appleby pointed out to father what a dangerous thing toleration might be and mentioned a lot of situations where you ought not to feel tolerant for a moment. He sat on till after ten o'clock and then I made father go to bed, and when he had done so, Matt confessed to me and Aaron that he'd stopped so late to make father let down as much of the port as possible and, in order to do so, had gone on drinking himself. He told Aaron that his legs weren't accountable and that he must have an arm to get himself home safe."

I laughed to hear Phyllis and was anxious for the result on father, because I knew what it had been on Mr. Appleby.

"Much the same effects overtook father," said Phyllis, "and when I called him, he didn't make any secret about it. He said that he and Matt were both drunk as owls last night and hoped I wouldn't let it go any further. But he admitted he'd enjoyed it and liked the conversation and liked the port wine too. He promised it shouldn't happen again, because he had a headache. But he kept a very happy temper notwithstanding and laughed at himself."

Next autumn he took to his bed and passed very peacefully away without pain just after the Christmas festival was over. And, only a fortnight before he went, he called up Mr. Townley and wrote a new will. The lawyer had hinted once or twice he should have done so after mother died, but he always put it off. Then, knowing his end was upon him, he made one and we heard it the afternoon following his funeral. You might say the whole countryside was there and a good few upper people, who didn't come themselves, sent their two-horse carriages according to the old custom, as a mark of respect to his memory. It's a use that's died out now, because, I suppose, the quality feel you can't send stinking, empty motor-cars to a funeral. But a score of farmers and half a hundred friends of the family were there and, of course, all of us except my second brother, James, who lived foreign and couldn't be there. Aaron and Primrose walked behind the coffin and I walked next, with Phyllis, and then came my husband with his father. My father's head man and other friends, including Micah Widecombe, bore the coffin and Parson Tozer took the service, for he was a great personal friend by now and thought much of father. He visited him a good few times before he died and preached a very fine sermon upon him the Sunday after the funeral.

So that was the last of my father, Moses Blanchard, and his passing wasn't so harsh for us as if he'd fallen suddenly, because he'd been fading such a longful time and we'd already felt what it was going to be like without him. Bleak it was to go up to Birch Hanger and know he bided there no more. Mr. Appleby felt his loss a very

great deal and missed his visits to father more than most things. Instead he'd often come to Tom and me of an evening now. He was still brooding on the salvation of everybody in general and he put his undying faith in trust. He'd blaze out the saving virtues of trust and declare how the world would go round a lot quicker if folk could only put faith in their fellow folk.

"Lord, Father!" I said, for I'd got to call him father a month after my own was gone. "Sure the world goes round quite quick enough in all conscience."

Yes, I called Mr. Appleby "father," because the word was dear to me and I didn't like to go without it. A great loss when you can't call anybody "father," or "mother" any more.

CHAPTER XIII

JUST one or two things overtook me round about now before I came to the first great climax of my life. There must have been a lot more lesser items that have slipped my memory, but nothing woven deep. The first item I can mind offered a very interesting subject for Tom's father. Very likely I should have forgotten it, but he made such a sermon about the affair that we had to take notice. The dear old man always jumped at a chance to show up Providence in the best possible light; but touching David Gollop, Tom always said it was merely an example of effect following cause and nothing to make a song about in any case.

It happened like this: I was left two hundred and fifty pounds of money under father's will, and knowing that Tom felt very anxious to get one of the new-fashion motor fishing-boats, now coming into business, I told him to go ahead. We saved a bit every year and had no calls upon us, so we could have bought the boat in any case, but now I hit upon the happy thought of using up my legacy for it and then Tom would have a new motor-driven fishing-boat without touching our savings. This was a great source of strength from the first, because she increased his range and enabled him to put his pots down on new grounds and saved him a tremendous lot of work. And after he'd had her no more than a week, he saved the life of David Gollop, which, but for the new boat and her swiftness, he couldn't have done.

It was evening time in late autumn and a bit of a sea running when Tom, on the way back from Surf Rocks under motor power, saw Dave sailing from a different direction and half a mile off. Then, just as Tom marked he wasn't holding a very good course,

the thing happened. A scat of wind came along and Dave's boat heeled over and didn't right herself again. What happened we only knew after; but Tom saw something must be wrong with Gollop, because the man knew his business and should not have been caught napping by a puff of wind. However, he capsized a mile or more from shore and half a mile from Tom who, well aware that Gollop couldn't swim, called on his new craft for an effort and soon had her going all out to get there in time. Which he did do. His fear was that David had fallen ill and lost his control and Tom thought it likely he might have fouled the sail ropes, or something, and so gone under with her; but Gollop was floating and Tom grabbed him before he went down for the last time. He was too bad to talk, but after they came ashore, where I waited for Tom as I often did, finding the rescued man could walk, I took him home to Linda. David was getting on in years now and after his adventure all the fire had gone out of him for the present. As we went along he got his wind back and confessed the fault was his.

"I stopped drinking a thought too long at the 'Arms,'" he said. "There was an old companion there and I got telling and listening before I went to work. My pots were down under West Cliff and I counted to fetch in with one tack, but once afloat, I found I'd drunk too much and wasn't seeing straight. I couldn't pick up the landmarks and what with the wind freshening and the ugly thought I was drunk, I turned tail and started for home. Then I'd just seen a boat but didn't know it was Tom, when a scat took me unawares and I was on my beam ends before I could loose the sheet. And the boat went down like a stone—better I'd gone with her, because I'm only saved to be ruined."

He told all this in bits between gasps and gurgles while I took him home and left him to Linda and heard next morning he had come through so far as his health was concerned.

But of course his future had to be looked after, and that was the really interesting thing. To begin with Dave's character took a turn for the better—not just for the better till something was done to furnish him with a new boat; but he was changed and got the fear of God in him for good.

Mr. Appleby entered into the case with all his energies, after a talk or two with the rescued man, and the affair cheered him a lot. Over and over again he explained to me and Tom all the ins and outs of Dave's reformation till we found ourselves a good deal tired of the subject.

"It's seldom given us to see Providence working so plain," said old Matt, "but a heartening sight when you do and a very fine picture

of God's way with man. If the Almighty wills for a man's soul to be saved, then not the most hardened or worthless creature can lose his soul. And He willed to save Dave Gollop—a task none of us ever thought on and most like beyond our power if we had. So Dave found himself drowning as a first step to salvation and Tom was ordained to buy a boat speedy enough to save him from it. And Dave being what he is—a very foolish and ignorant person—had to suffer the only way the Light could be let in upon his beery soul. And now what do we find? He's come to his Maker in time."

Fishing folk are always pretty generous to a man who loses his craft and his living along with it so, thanks largely to Matthew's efforts and the generosity of the lord of the manor, another boat was got for Dave and he carried on. The general opinion decided that he would take to drink again when the storm was over, but Tom's father always said he would not and he proved right. For old Matthew there was only one thorn about the case, because he counted on it that Dave would become a good member of the Church of England and work out his reformation there; but, instead of that, Gollop threw in his lot with the Salvation Army and found their fold suit him best. He enrolled with them and a time came when Linda let me hear how her brother had preached at an open-air service and told the Salvationists he was a brand snatched from the burning, and so properly grateful to his Maker for His mercy in saving him, that his only thought in future was going to be how best to show his thankfulness and contrition. After all the poor chap hadn't done anything so very fearful in his past. He was selfish and greedy and stupid and given to drink too much; but to hear him talk about his awful past, as he grew so fond of doing now, and how he'd escaped by the skin of his teeth from the eternal flames of the pit and so on, always amused me. But he stuck to it and took the pledge, passed through the penitence stage and got to such a satisfied and confident feeling that he started to save other people! Linda went over too and wore her salvation bonnet of a Sunday with the best; but Linda was a Christian by her nature and couldn't help being a right down good little thing whatever she called herself.

The other matter that sprung upon us had a lot more bearing upon Tom and me and was, in fact, the greatest in our career. Quite by chance it fell out, and all thanks to Micah Widecombe. He offered to come to tea one Sunday, knowing he'd be welcome, and with him brought a little girl of eight years old. She wasn't any relation of his but the niece of a great friend of Micah's, who had suddenly been landed with the child because his brother and his brother's wife, her parents, had lost their lives together in a char-a-banc

accident and there was only her uncle, Micah's friend, to minister to the girl and look after her. From being a prosperous little maid with good prospects and a happy home, she was robbed of everything at one blow. An only child and now up against it with none but her uncle—a young, unmarried man—to watch over her. And he didn't want her at all and fell back upon Micah in hopes that, being a lonely chap without a family, the smith might take over this orphan maid and perhaps adopt her. She didn't come empty-handed, for everything her parents possessed belonged to her now and the capital worked out to give her something near a pound a week. So Micah's friend reckoned that little Janice Withers might easily get good foster parents, and the only job would be to see they were trustworthy and respectable. Janice came to spend a week with Micah and he brought her to tea with us, and when Tom and the child were out in the garden, Widecombe told me her sad story and how he was in no mind to adopt her, yet felt, given the right home, it might be done seeing her money advantages. We ran over some childless people, but couldn't hit on a likely quarter; and it was then the astonishing thing overtook us. Janice in herself might well have tempted any child-loving man or woman, because she was a wondrous pretty little girl. Bright as an April morning, with flaxen hair, big silver-grey eyes and a lovely mouth. She wore black for her poor parents and it made her look fair as a dream. In fact I felt amazed to see anything so lovely when she came in along with Micah and shook hands with Tom and me and spoke in a musical voice. She was most dignified in her ways and quite collected for such a young creature. I love a pretty thing about me and I felt my heart go out to her; but that couldn't be called very odd; what made the affair so extraordinary was Tom's attitude to her and the effect she had upon him. When they were gone again we talked the child over and agreed that she was a sweet piece and a most pleasant object to the eye.

"Never knew a youngster to draw me like she did," confessed Tom and, after I had told him what Micah was looking for on her account, he said something even more remarkable.

"Of course we've talked it over in the past whether you'd like to adopt a young boy or girl," he reminded me, "but, after Primrose's nipper, we decided, once for all, against. Micah knew that, so of course he didn't propose any such idea with an eye to us, but only to hear your opinion."

"Good Powers, no!" I answered. "He never thought of us—more did I. We ran over a few names, but, though easy enough to

dispose of a child with a pound a week, we couldn't hit on a hopeful home."

"What did you think of the maid?" he asked.

"Outstanding," I said. "Pretty as a mantelshelf decoration, but no vanity. Just a natural, beautiful little human creature, and evidently brought up to be well-mannered."

"She's got a nerve," said Tom. "Fond of dancing and singing, so she told me, but said, after losing her mum and dad, she'd made up her mind never to dance nor yet sing any more."

"Please God she'll dance and sing again some day," I said.

"You'd never be like to come between anybody and dancing and singing," he said. "Queer both of us should have felt drawn by the child."

"Very queer," I agreed, "but often queer things take a commonplace turn. I wouldn't mind giving Janice a home—not for her money, but her little self. My first thought was you, of course, and I'd never fancied for a moment you'd take kindly to her more than you take kindly to children in general."

"We've tried a boy," he said, "and a very nice boy was Timothy, as boys go. But for my part, Pete, I wouldn't offer no objections to help rearing that particular girl if you felt equal to her. She could come on trial and you could see if you found yourself to neighbour with her, or otherwise."

I was too surprised to answer for a minute, but my mind ran over it and, after I'd thought of us, I thought of Janice.

"Something in me seems to favour it; but there's her," I said. "She might well reckon we were too old to make such a young thing as her happy. She may not have liked us half as well as we liked her."

"There's that," he granted. "She couldn't fail to like you, but might turn against me."

"You needn't take such a humble view as that," I said. "If we ventured upon her, we should be mighty quick to see whether we were making her happy and chiming with her nature; but it's a big order, because that child would have every boy in Beesworthy running after her in less than ten years' time and, once she'd fitted in, if she did so, then, when she fell in love, it would soon be 'good-bye' to her."

Tom didn't take a very grave view of the future, however. His thoughts were on the present.

"There's points must be put to Micah," he said, "and he must lay 'em before the child's uncle. Firstly the money. I should let it be known very clear indeed we didn't touch the money. If we adopted the child in all sober seriousness, then I should decree she had so much

of her money as she needed for her education and to dress herself; but the rest would be left to goody for her. However, the first thing will be to see Micah and if he turns us down, enough said."

"Of course he won't: he'd be thankful to God it we took her; and so would her uncle," I promised, feeling quite confident on that score. "And her money isn't the first thing. I agree about that; but the first thing to know is whether she'd like to come."

"That's all right," he said. "I'll step over to Micah before she goes to bed and ask him to bring her to tea, or else send her to tea, again to-morrow and tell her she can come and give us a try if she's minded. She may turn it down pronto."

So, in a matter of a few hours, we were up against a complete change in our lives—the last thing to have been expected and welcomed by either of us! One might have fallen for Janice Withers, but that both should take such a fancy for her—that was a freak of human nature outside the common run. I think we both felt a bit self-conscious after we'd reached thus far, and looked at each other with a sort of apology in our eyes. I laughed rather vaguely, and Tom tried to be business-like and got his hat presently and said he was going to drop in on Micah.

"Tell him I'm willing to nest the child for a month or so, if she likes to come," I said, "and that it is our wish, should all go well, to adopt her for keeps if there's no impediments in her uncle's mind. He's a superior sort of man, else he'd have grabbed her himself for her money."

"That'll do to go on with," answered Tom, "and if anything comes of it, then we'll ask Mr. Townley to make it all in order."

"I'm wondering now what father's like to think about it," I told him.

"Trust father," he assured me, and I reminded him to ask Micah one important question.

"Be sure to learn what the child said about you and me," I begged. "She's certain to have spoken of us and uttered an opinion for or against."

He was away an hour or more, and when he came back and had his supper and a final pipe, he told me that, so far, things looked favourable enough.

"Micah will bring her to tea again to-morrow," he said, "and I'll get off the sea early and look in before you have finished. Widecombe's pleased at the idea of us trying her out and very sure her uncle will favour the scheme. Janice thought well of us. She said we were very nice people and had a nice house. The sea is novel to her and she likes it. I knew that already, because I told her,

when she was in the garden this afternoon, that I'd take her in my boat perhaps, and it pleased her to think upon. She asked me if I'd ever caught a mermaid, and I said I never had, nor yet expected to."

"It looks as if you'd caught something anyway," I said, and we talked in bed about our adventure till Tom went to sleep.

That was the beginning of the story, but we didn't advance our cause, or press for her, till Micah let her know what we were willing to do and explained to her that she was under no compulsion on her side and it wouldn't hurt our feelings if she turned against the thought. She was such an intelligent child that you felt such a question might safely be left to her; because nobody wants to adopt a young thing that don't fancy them. They took their tea with us again and Janice was told she might come and go from us and run in to me when she had a mind to. So she came pretty often and got to know us. Then, after a week of that, Micah talked to her seriously and told her she could come and stop with us for a month and see how she liked us. She jumped at this and was very wishful to come.

"We'll go on just as usual," I told Tom. "We won't fuss over her, nor spoil her, but serve her faithful and get to know her character and where to help. For a child of her age a month will seem an eternity and, in four weeks, she'll either beg to live with us, or pray to escape. You must ride with a loose rein, so as we can get to know her real self and you can trust a girl of that age to be her real self, if there's nothing to frighten her from it."

So she came and wondrous good company she was for a girl of eight. She wasn't an angel and she wasn't a door-mat, thank God, for if you start life being a door-mat, then there will be plenty of people to wipe their shoes on you for the rest of your days. She had character and a will, but neither much clashed with me. Her ideas interested us both above a bit, because they pointed to a manner of life quite outside any experience of ours and rather aimed at a career that looked dangerous and doubtful. But she showed that very rare thing in a small girl: ambition and some idea of what she wanted to do with herself and no fear of the hard work such a calling might demand before you could hope to earn a living by it. Even young boys don't often show a steadfast and lasting ambition in any particular direction, and in those days it was still more remarkable for a small girl to do so. But she wanted to be a dancer and was dancing-mad, so the first thing I decreed, after consulting with Tom's father, was to let her have proper dancing lessons with a lady who lived a few miles off at Kingsbridge and kept a school of instruction in the art. Old Matthew approved and said, though nothing was like to come of

it, yet it would occupy her mind and interest her and brighten her young life to meet other children learning to dance. He took to her heartily, yet withheld his judgment as to whether we ought to adopt her, because he said to do so would be a great responsibility and we must feel sure that it was our Maker's will for us to undertake Janice and not a passing fancy on our part. We didn't vex our consciences on that score, however, because we had long decided she was going to be a blessing to us. We only delayed further for time to pass and the child decide without any grown-up pressure. In fact Tom and I rather held off the little thing and didn't show half what we felt already, for fear we should make it hard for her if she wanted to go. I warned Tom again and again that he was being too nice to her, but he vowed that he'd have treated any other little one the same.

"Why's your dog so jealous then?" I asked, because he'd got yet another dog by now: the one that followed the cocker spaniel, and this creature knew very well what Tom thought of Janice and didn't favour her at all as yet. A yellow-haired, mongrel dog with agate eyes and a rare ratter, who worshipped Tom by night and day. There's no doubt he wasn't well disposed to Janice at first, but she won him over, and when he found she was not taking his place in Tom's affections, he welcomed her as a cheerful addition to the home circle.

We soon discovered the child had most peculiar gifts, and father at first didn't know whether we ought to encourage or suppress them. Even at her age there was a queer talent in her for sizing up other people and seeing their habits and gestures and manner of speech. She was a born mimic, but never brought any rudeness into doing it. She liked everybody and birds and beasts too, and just copied 'em for delight, same as other children, with a taste for drawing, will try to draw what they fancy. She didn't see no evil or wrong in it, but would take off a man, or woman, or child and then ask us who it was she was copying, and we always knew. Even her young voice she could tune to the note of a grown-up person or the noise of an animal. Father told us that when she was with him, she'd imitate Tom, or me till he couldn't but laugh; while when she was with us, she'd walk and talk and wave her little hand like father. I laughed till I cried when she imitated Linda Gollop, and she did Mr. Townley wonderful well and took to him when the question of her future came up. The lawyer was getting on in years now, but just the same, kindly, busy friend as always, and he told us that the truth about Janice was this:

"That girl's going to be what they call an artist," explained Simon Townley. "They can't be accounted for. They just crop up in any family and an artist may suddenly appear, where no such

thing was ever known before, to create confusion sometimes for folk who don't understand anything about art. There's no matter of doubt, I fancy, that her love for dancing and singing and her extraordinary ear and eye for her fellow-creatures mean that she will want to be a performer of some sort. She may have acquired these gifts from a fairy godmother in her cradle."

"Where does that lead to, Mr. Townley?" I asked.

"Who can say at her age, Pete?" he answered. "She's going to be very pretty and you easily see that if she sticks to dancing and grows up strong and is not driven beyond her strength, she might become a first-rate performer. But you cannot prophesy much about such a youngster. You are taking on something of a surprise packet if she stops with you."

Tom said he hadn't counted to adopt anything in the nature of a surprise packet exactly; but I withstood him there, because every young creature must be a surprise packet, and the surprise, when it comes, may be pleasant or otherwise; but I felt we had enough to go on in the case of Janice Withers and her nice nature and her pluck to work at what she loved.

"Such things look to show a brave heart," I said, "and if that heart is in the right place, even though she turns out to be an artist as Simon Townley expects, yet she will continue to be a good girl most likely, though, if she was to become a public performer of some kind, then we should lose her, because there isn't a living for any public performer in Beesworthy."

Father, when he heard the lawyer's views, hoped he might be mistaken, because he cherished a general opinion that public performers, unless they were ministers of the gospel and famed for preaching the Word and gleaning souls, seldom did anything useful for mankind at large. He didn't know a thing about artists from his own experience, but had a misty fear they were up to no good as a rule; but he felt confident that he and Tom and I combined should knock any such hankerings out of Janice, and bring her to take a serious view of life and give art of any sort a miss. I knew he was wrong when he said this; but he agreed so far as to admit the future would take its appointed course, as it always does, and our part was to do our duty by the child and leave the rest in Higher Hands. Time proved we had now gone too far to draw back in any case and, at the end of four or five weeks, we learned the young thing's opinions. I knew them already for, as days passed, she had fitted closer and closer into our scheme of life and wished once and again it would go on and she could come and live with us.

"I love you and I love old Mr. Appleby and I love young Mr.

Appleby and I love Miss Blossom who's teaching me dancing," she'd say, "and I wish you could let me stop with you for evermore."

So, when she heard we would keep her and become her first friends and take the place of her own father and mother to her, she was very excited about it and promised to be faithful and good as gold. We tried to explain what adopting her would mean and how we should take the place of her family and so on, but she said the advantage was on her side and she said "Appleby" was a lot prettier name than "Withers" and she'd like to be an Appleby if we'd agree.

All of which duly and lawfully happened and her uncle came to see us and told Micah Widecombe behind our backs he was well content because he couldn't better do his duty to her dead father than by handing over his niece to our control. We were rather proud of our success though, reading between the lines of what the neighbours said, I found there were few who thought it a very clever thing. I knew Janice wasn't going to be a mother's girl exactly, though her love for me and Tom grew with ours for her and was the part of herself most dear to her. Many lose the loves they had as children and outgrow their childhood affections but, having won Janice, we never lost her again and nothing ever shook our devotion to each other. She lived in two compartments and was always busy and ready to help me and be an every day, good girl in one compartment; and she filled the other compartment with her dancing and her dreams. Meanwhile, she grew into a very beautiful creature blessed with health and determination. At first, after hearing Mr. Townley, we went in some doubt as to what it might be for us harbouring an artist, and we waited with anxiety to see whether she would take wing presently and cry out for other artists to neighbour with; but nothing appeared to show she wasn't well content with things so far. She behaved like any other nice, cheerful child and her good looks didn't go to her head and spoil her. Years passed before she looked at herself from the art point of view, or understood that an outstanding appearance may be useful in itself and run a good second to cleverness for any public performer. For there's little that disarms folk quicker than loveliness.

When Janice was turned twelve a great experience overtook her. Until then her master passion continued to be dancing and her mistress told me a time would come when she might rise to greatness if she stuck to it. But she warned me that the child would have to be sent to higher learning than she could give and devote all her energies to dancing before all else—dancing being a whole-time job. That would be after her school days were done and she was her own mistress. All of which Janice well understood but reckoned lay too

far ahead to bother about as yet. But then happened a new experience that didn't promise to turn her away from art for a moment, yet enlarged her mind and gave her a new bent.

We generally had a Penny Reading now and again during the winter months at Beesworthy, to wake us up and give such as cared for entertainments something to talk about; and Mr. Tozer, our vicar, favoured them and always took the chair and sang a comic song perhaps, or told some of his funny stories. But for once, when our church bells went wrong and were found dangerous and wanted re-hanging, Mr. Tozer ordained something much above a Penny Reading with a view to raising cash for the bells. He planned an important affair, to attract the whole parish and give us a high-class show worth big money. To that end he summoned his sister, who had once been a professional actress and made her living on the stage. In those days it seldom happened that the better class of women did so, but being one of the artist breed and that way inclined with all the needful gifts, Miss Tozer had gone on the boards and there remained without any loss of character. Now she was married to the land agent of the lord of the manor and the mother of three young children. She had retired from the theatre but was much addicted to it and now set to work for her brother to make his entertainment a long way out of the common. In fact she was going to arrange a play in our public room and have a stage and scenery and arrange for an event far outside our experience. Nowadays, what with the talking pictures and motor-buses and other inventions, play-acting has long been within reach of Beesworthy, but fifty years ago or so that was not the case and what we didn't know we didn't miss and went on amazing well without; so, after it came to be heard we were to have a play, we woke to much curiosity and interest, because but a few of us elder ones had ever seen such a thing.

On our honeymoon at Plymouth, years ago now, Tom and I had gone to the theatre one night and seen a very sad play which made me weep buckets, though we had never witnessed another since and never felt to want to; but Mr. Tozer gave out that this was to be a funny play and everybody hoped to go, while for us there was a most vital item in the affair. The play was the second half of the show, but the first half consisted of different items—the sort of mixed entertainment like music halls offer—and among these items our Janice was going to appear for the first time in her life on a public stage and do a dance with Miss Blossom, her mistress, at the piano to make the needful music. Because they say that, without music, dancing would be but a lost art and never, since David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, was dancing seen without the noise of drums and trumpets

and cymbals and such like. A piano Janice would have to dance to and we felt much amazed at her confidence and nerve as the time approached. You'd have thought a little maid must be feared of her life at such an ordeal, but no: her one care was to dance her piece to the very utmost of her power, and she said the business of having every step right and in time with the music would occupy her mind and body so fully that there wouldn't be time to feel frightened.

A gentleman came down from London to superintend the play. He was an old friend of Mr. Tozer's sister and understood such things and got everything up to concert pitch as they say, before the night. He rehearsed the play and also the odd items and was a lot taken by Janice for her looks and still more for her dance, which he witnessed at a rehearsal of it. Evidently he found she was going to make good, for he took some pains over her dance and altered a touch here and there and altered her dress and arranged for a limelight to shine on her. Her mistress, Miss Blossom, told me that he was a great artist and worthy of admiration himself; and she prayed that Janice must be put in the programme as taught by her, because it would be a valuable advertisement for her dancing classes.

The night came and the hall was packed tighter than old Masterman, our hall-keeper, had ever known it to be before. Forty pounds were made from the audience, and not one among them grudged their money, for it was a most joyful evening and nobody laughed more than I did. The play, all performed by our locals, proved to be the merriest affair and folk properly roared over it. In fact, for the first time in my life, I got a shadowy notion of what art means and found it most comforting to the spirits. And better than anything to us was our foster-daughter and her loveliness with the limelight thrown down upon her and the rest of the stage dark when she did her dance. The gentleman from London arranged it all and Janice, flickered about, like a wondrous, fairy flower that had danced away off its stem. She got coloured lights thrown on her—yellow and white and pink and blue. Never was anything so pretty out of a dream and she won high applause and a bouquet thrown up to her when she came forward in her snow-white little frock and made her bow.

"So that's being an artist," said Tom to me.

"It may be," I agreed, "but she'll never love us any the less whatever befalls her."

She came and sat with us afterwards, to see the play, and forgot all about her dancing when she watched the vicar's sister perform an old woman and look as if she was a hundred years old, though not yet above fifty-five in truth. A very funny old woman too, with more sense in her little finger than all the other people in the play.

[illegible] was going on in her brain made no difference to her nature notwithstanding and she was the same to us as usual.

During the spring following my brother, Aaron, married at last, mostly I think because he felt it his duty and time to be done. And my dear friend, Grace Belworthy, felt much the same about it. She suited him well being most industrious and an eye like a hawk for details. They were both getting on now but they thought so much alike and chimed so well that one knew all would go well. My feeling for Aaron always had been one of much affection combined with regret that he didn't get more fun out of life. Folk unfamiliar with him held him to be rather a dour man, but the truth was that all his energies and all his pleasures centred on the welfare of Birch Hanger, and to see a good harvest represented to him the best happiness he could imagine. In truth imagination formed no part of his character, and Grace wasn't much gifted in that way either, so to see imagination breaking out in any shape worried them. They got on passing well without it and didn't know any cause why it should be encouraged. Phyllis stopped with them in the farmhouse. She'd known Grace all her life, same as I had, and found herself more content and comfortable with Aaron than away from him. And Grace saw no reason why she should not stop and was happy for her to do so. All the hands liked Phyllis and found her a comfort behind the scenes sometimes; because, while he loved work himself, unfortunately Aaron had a way with him to make other people hate it. A labouring man seldom loves work, but my brother always thought there was something wrong if any of the hinds didn't share his great enthusiasm for toil and never could see that they were at Birch Hanger to earn their living, and that done, liked their bit of rest and family life and scrap of distraction. You might have thought that Janice wouldn't have been particularly attracted to Birch Hanger, but Phyllis was very fond of her from the first and she often went up at hay harvest and corn harvest and other times. Then presently Aaron became a father and Grace bore him a son and showed imagination in the process, because she happened to care for me a lot and would have me beside her holding her hand at the time. But even parentage didn't suffice to raise any romance in them. Neither made any stir about it and the boy's mother was glad to get back to her work. They let Janice stand godmother because she was

"Promise me one thing, Aaron," I begged when the baby was born. "Don't you set him to work too soon, before he's learned to walk and talk."

But a joke was wasted on my brother, needless to say. He listened quite serious and promised he wouldn't.

"I shan't expect nothing from him till he's four," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

You will find that while life seems to jog on for most of us pretty slow and one day much like the last, yet changes are working out of sight, same as the moles, and time goes on for ever heaving up the seedlings of the future where least to be expected. But there were black and busy moles labouring under earth at this season, though their existence was not guessed as yet by Beesworthy. No doubt the rulers marked the ground beginning to tremble, but our high and mighty were not bright enough, nor quick enough, to read the signs in time, and, when news reached down to us, the fat was in the fire and no river of human tears deep enough to put it out.

Meanwhile, before this fearful happening, no lesser event of any note overtook me and mine. What befell was ordinary and no matter for more than passing pleasure or regret. For one thing Tom and Janice and myself changed houses and went to live with Matthew Appleby. His housekeeper couldn't serve him any more and he was getting feebler himself by now and wanted tending. And his house was his own and would pass to Tom when he went, so we moved in and were the gainers, because his home was old and better built than ours and larger by two bedrooms and a sizeable garden with a nice patch of grass for my fowl run. Father welcomed us with thanksgiving and took great pleasure in finding us under his roof. He was very glad to divest himself of all earthly cares now so he handed over his money to Tom and left his welfare in our hands.

"If a man is thrifty and saving and wants for his first-born to have what he leaves behind, then it runs against justice," said father, "for his money to be snatched the moment he's in his coffin. A most vampire scheme and an everlasting disgrace to Parliament for letting it happen. And so Tom shall have all now."

Little he knew, poor old bird, where his plots and plans would land him. And still less did Tom and I know.

Then there was the retirement of the dear old doctor. He'd been such a part of village life that nobody ever stopped to wonder what it might be like without him. But the time came when such an honest man had to throw up the sponge, because one of his senses was failing him and it was vital to his work. He could see well enough and feel with his usual delicate touch, but when he couldn't hear the works within through his stethescope, then he acted accordingly. He broke the bad news gradual, but his young, new-fledged partner was well up to the task by now and not afraid of night work, so he took charge and carried on and reigned over the health of the village. He had self-confidence begot of his cleverness, which is surely a good thing, because, if a doctor seems in much doubt or is given to hum and hedge over you, then your heart sinks and you feel you can't put your life in his hands with the complete confidence a sick man, or woman, ought to feel. Against that kind of uncertain healer there's another sort even worse, and that's the bluffing, confident kind, who dash off a prescription and say you'll be well again the moment you let it down. In fact a right good doctor, who cures you so fast as it can be done, or tells you the truth if he can't, is a priceless treasure, like every other right good thing. Our only dread was that Dr. Tanner would aim at higher rewards than Beesworthy could offer him and leave us presently for a better job. And all too soon he did leave us—not because he wanted to, but because the Army called him and his duty was to go.

For ere long the brewing storm broke at last and England was up against it, and in general opinion nothing more fearful had ever confronted the British Empire. There was a famous soldier living in those days, and he'd been crying out for a longful time that we had got the wool pulled over our eyes without seeing a glimpse of what was to come; but the rulers paid no heed to the famous man and went their way and thought him about as useless as an owl hooting in the night. Yet he was telling God's truth all the time and our enemies, when ready to do so, made it needful to go to war with them and clip their wings good and hard. We were poor starters as usual, but valiant Lord Kitchener raised an army, wondrous posters stared at us from every wall and wayside barn and the manhood of England got into training and soon went off by the hundreds of thousands to France. Then it was that war came home to the women as no war before, and we found not one of our young men but would be wanted and wanted quickly.

There is nothing to dwarf a woe so fast as a still greater one, for

the wind that bends you down to-day looks naught when to-morrow brings a whole gale. We were just beginning to sigh because we must lose Janice ere long, when far worse faced me and I found that Tom and I must be parted. The precious girl was going to London for a course of dancing lessons and instructions in the art of elocution and acting. She would see stage plays and ballets and the like and finally decide for herself what she was going to fasten upon and where she was most likely to make good. Thanks to the vicar's sister, who took great and kindly interest in her, things were already planned in town for her to have a comfortable home, with responsible people where she would be safe along with other girl students pursuing their studies at one task or another. Tom and I knew well enough that this was the end of her childhood and the first sure sign her way must lead into a world beyond our ken; but then came huge and bloody conflict, and the plans of mice and men all went down the wind in ruin for thousands. The Great War was like a spring tide that swept over all alike and overlooked none. So the mightier evil overwhelmed the lesser and a week after the fearful catastrophe first stunned England, my husband brought the news that he was going to play his part. It came as a cruel surprise to me, for I didn't look far enough ahead, or remember his professional skill on the sea. I counted that no demand for a man of his age would arise until many classes of younger men were called to the colours; but that is where I went adrift, because, in less than no time, all seafaring men were cried for. And Tom was glad because he had grown uneasy and a thought cast down for fear he might not be needed. But now came an evening when he broke it to me and told of how the Empire stood. He came to it cautious, knowing it must be a facer for me, and spoke a longer speech than I had heard from him for years. And father supported him.

"It's like this, Pete," he said. "We're an island and, in sober ruth, a darned small one as islands go. But we have got our colonies and the good will of the world at large behind us for the most part and, being mistress of the sea, can keep our life-lines clear. 'Life-lines' is the name for 'em, because, if the enemy had it in his power to cut those life-lines, the United Kingdom would be hungry in a month and starving to death in six. And Germany knows that very well, so she's going to come between us and our food supplies before all else if she can. She'll give our Merchant Marine hell; she'll send her under-sea boats into our sea lanes and her battleships and cruisers also to take toll of the vessels speeding to us. She'll put a ring of steel round us beyond our power to break if she can; and that's where sailors are called for as never before in our history; that's where I

and the likes of me come in. It may be in home waters of the Channel and the North Sea, or Severn Sea, or Irish Sea, or it may be far ways off; but minesweepers by the thousand and tens of thousands are called for as never yet, and those are the craft that such as I will man. There can't be too many of us and we can't answer the call too quick; and such work will come as a blessing to countless fishermen who are going to find their own living taken from them till war's over."

I looked at Tom and yet found it hard to credit what he told.

"I've heard of chimney-sweepers," I said, "and of carpet-sweepers, but never of minesweepers."

Then he explained how the Germans would come by night and pour down millions of mines in the path of our ships, and how there would be a vast need to fight that manner of warfare and trawl for mines as the fishing-fleets trawl for fish. Of course that was a sort of task at which Tom would excel, and he was going to begin doing it very soon. He didn't say anything about the danger of the job, but spoke of it as valuable and necessary and well in his power; and his father said there was little doubt he'd get command of a minesweeper as soon as the Admiralty heard tell of him.

"Mark me," said old Mr. Appleby, "My son will be master of a minesweeper in the name of God before he's much older."

Which was exactly what fell out, for, a few days after I learned this bad news, Tom was called to Dartmouth by the Government and all the needful steps taken. Then he had but a week to make ready and report again for duty and join up on a minesweeper with her home port Plymouth for the present.

So I found myself in a pretty selfish mood and sorrier for myself than ever I had been in my life. For here was everything taken from me at one hard grab: Tom heading straight into unknown danger and our girl off to London. But Janice helped me to brave the storm. She didn't find herself in two minds about it, declared the case was altered for her and she wasn't dancing, nor yet play-acting for the minute.

"I stop with you, Mother," she said. "There's going to be a lot for girls to do now and the first thing is to find what's best."

Little she knew, or anybody knew, the tower of strength women were to be, or the paths they would tread—paths until that time only thought possible for men. But in a manner of speaking women got the chance of their lives, and that was one good thing the Great War did: to show us what lay in our power and open out the world for us and reveal such qualities as were never guessed to lie in us. The thin end of the wedge we got in then and drove it home with years to come. Women were doing man's work in no time and,

many thousands of them rose to the challenge, overturned the old order of things and proved themselves ready for black-coated work and well able to tackle the labours of the young men called away from their office life to the war. And much more they did than turn into clever clerks and mistresses of figures. They went into the factories and ranged alongside the armament makers and shipbuilders and land workers and were found capable of using their strength as well as their learning. Women proved themselves in the fire of war and showed such precious metal as they were never thought to contain. They emerged out of their seclusion by the million and came to be regarded with new eyes by the world of men. Some of the male folk approved and welcomed the wonder of them, but many were bitter jealous and little liked to see single women taking the bread out of the mouths of married men. But the tide flowed on and, my word! it has got a powerful long way up the beach since then, for look at us now!

Janice found work within reach of me, for she took up nursing at a war hospital near by Beesworthy, and Tom went to sea in due course and was soon made master of His Majesty's minesweeper, *Waterwitch*. And I joined up with a knitting party, to make all manner of woollen garments according to pattern. Work cried to the willing on every side and there were countless useful deeds to be done, however humble, for those ready to do them; but thousands, like my brother, Aaron, and Micah Widecombe, stuck to their own jobs, the one on his land, the other at his anvil. Father Appleby took on a queer task, yet useful in its way. He had relations up at Princetown in the midst of Dartmoor, and there a little factory had sprung up, to collect and clean and dry and make sweet the acres of bog moss that flourished up aloft in the wilderness. Our old man toiled thereat valiantly and enjoyed the task and told us how to be alone with his Maker in the wastes of the great moor, with none but fox and carrion crow for company, was very uplifting to the mind and made for a good conscience and good appetite and dreamless sleeping.

The young men, who didn't see their way to fight, were herded in the Princetown convict prison at that time, and the old sinners taken away to make room for them. Father saw something of these objectors on Sundays, when they were not called to work, and many Godfearing young fellows held religious services among the stones and heather and preached to each other and supported each other as best they might. Father told us they were a very mixed bag and while some looked to be poor stuff and only there to save their skins, others again were noble young men and the salt of the earth. He said there were highly educated, brave fellows among them, who would a thousand times rather be neighbouring with the troops in

France and facing death than bawked up in prison with the cowards. But their consciences forbade the shedding of blood, though their attitude to the war often ruined their future prospects and lost them the respect and friendship of their relations and the world in general.

Mr. Appleby toiled up there all through the first summer of the war and then he came home again, ordaining to travel up once more when spring returned; but by that time things were changed and he found work to do within his strength at home; while Tom got a few days' leave from time to time and spent them with me and told me of his work but made light of the perils. He was a tired man now and grey showing in his red hair, but his eyes were keen as ever and he had become very interested in the war and said how the Merchant Marine was doing a grand job of work for the nation and how the minesweepers were carrying on a useful battle and helping the ships to keep afloat. But he felt sure we shouldn't conquer the enemy's under-sea vessels yet awhile and the toll of men and ships continued to be heavy.

After Tom's last visit to me, H.M.S. *Waterwitch* sailed to do her work far away off the coast of France and I was lamenting how long it would be before I saw him again, when there crashed down upon me the fearful news that he had gone and I should never see him any more. I had half finished a grand jersey of heavy wool, with love knit into every stitch, when there came a telegram to tell how his boat was lost with all hands and Tom and his mates had perished. Actually knitting I was at the time the news came and I put down the jersey to read it. And then the paper dropped out of my hands and I sat like a stone and stared at the deep blue, double-knitting wool of the jersey and didn't move till father came into the house-place an hour later.

"He's gone beyond heat or cold, Father," I said. "Tom's killed."

He'd heard already at the post office and hastened back to support me.

"One more gathered home to greet us when our turn comes," he answered. "You must cling to it he's gone on before, Pete—not gone very far ahead of me, but a good few years ahead of you most like. You must turn for your comfort to your God and the memory of a rare good man who has died for England, along with millions more."

My mind had winged away in a most curious manner by then and I couldn't yet face up to the truth, because, if I had been able to grasp it, the thing might have driven me out of my senses and beyond reach to return to them. So, by a sort of merciful instinct, I put the truth at the back of my thoughts and just occupied my reason with a trivial thing. Like a drowning man clutching at a straw it was.

What Tom's father expected me to say I do not know, but it must have been far off from what I did say.

"I'll finish it," I told him. "He can't wear it now, but some mother's son shall wear it; some other bold hero shall catch heat from it."

That was how the jersey stuck in my mind to ward off what had happened.

When Janice heard, she sped to me, and I never wept one tear till I saw hers falling. And then I cried into the small hours and began to understand what had overtook me. The gap seemed to yawn worse as I gained strength to face it—like an aching tooth, that only lets up when you're asleep, but is waiting for you as soon as ever you wake again. The kindness of the people and the flood of their sympathy left me properly gasping sometimes and I suffered a very great deal and my light near went out altogether once or twice. Then I turned the corner and started to travel on what was a lonely road to me now, with all the guide posts gone.

You remember things that stand out in the midst of misfortunes. My heart continued to tell me I was never going to smile again and my thoughts continued as black as my mourning gown; but six weeks after Tom's death, there came David Gollop for a tell. Linda had done her little best to comfort, poor old dear, and many others, including my brother, Aaron and his wife, Grace, and sister Phyllis, all had said kind words and shared in my sorrow so far as they were able. Parson Tozer came, too, and sat half an hour and told how my husband's name would stand first on the monument to our parish heroes to be lifted after the war was over.

"He was the eldest of our local men to make the great sacrifice," said the vicar, "and we shall always cherish and honour his name, Mrs. Appleby."

Then came Dave. He was an officer of some kind in the Salvation Army now and busy in well doing.

"I didn't call no sooner, Pete," he said, "though very willing for a tell, but I thought to let time do its healing work and the Angel of Mercy comfort you. You see I'm for ever joined to your family by the will of God. Firstly, when you were but a girl. On that ugly day when you and Tom nearly drowned in the sea, it was I that plunged in the boiling surf and saved your life at risk to my own, and then, after long years passed over us, it was Tom who, by the will of Heaven, in his new motor fishing-craft, came to my rescue and saved me alive, like a brand clutched from the burning. Because, in those dark days, I was far from ready to face my Maker, and well He knew it. So your good man did more than save my body: he saved my soul, and never

did I deny him the credit when my eyes were opened and, like the Apostle Paul, I repented of my wickedness and came to the Rock of Ages and clove thereto like a limpet for evermore."

"So you have," I said. "You turned over a new leaf from that day forward, Dave."

"I've made a good beginning granted," he agreed, "and count upon making a good end when the time comes. I was worth salvation, Pete, and blessed is the man who lives to know the Almighty found him to be worth saving and took steps according. By dark ways He may choose to lead us back into the light; but if we have got the courage and trust to follow them, then all is well. And knowing you and Tom from youth up, I can hearten you with the word of the faithful and tell how your Tom is saved for eternity and you are counted worth saving too."

"I was never lost to my knowledge till he died," I said. "You needn't to tell me Tom's in heaven, Dave. Where should such a man be?"

"Then join the Army and make dead sure of meeting him again in the Blessed Land, my dear woman," he begged. "Many are called; few chosen."

David had grown a grey beard now. It wasn't much of a beard, but made him look a thought more noteworthy, and his uniform added to his appearance a little. He wasn't so tumble-down as he had been, though still a tolerable poor object.

And then I felt my lips smiling again to hear him and it gave me a queer sort of shock to think they hadn't lost the power to smile. Just a ghost of a smile and nothing whatever to smile about; but he ran on, as smug as a cat after a bowl of milk, and seemed to lick his lips and very near purr to think of all the efforts he had made to defy Satan and conquer the powers of evil and cling to virtue. Nothing funny in the triumph of a humble man over his faults and weaknesses, yet, having happed to know him in his earlier days and remember some of his adventures in the past, to see Dave so terribly pleased with himself gave me a flash of silly amusement. He opened a door for me that I thought was bolted for evermore and I was glad to smile and felt kindly to him.

Tom's father never did endure any extreme of grief, because being a right-down Christian in the full sense of the word, he wouldn't suffer death, even of his own flesh and blood, to cast him into any despair. He held that to let your own grief bulk larger than the knowledge how a loved has entered into eternal life, was a denial of faith and a most selfish line of conduct.

"You must let Tom's triumph over-crow your loss, Pete, and feel your tears should be wept for joy rather than sorrow," he said.

So the old man felt, but I couldn't pretend anything like that, because I knew right well exactly how Tom himself would have felt if I'd been snatched away from him. Where he hoped I might have gone would have been poor comfort against the bitter blow that I was gone. Old Matthew said to me once that people were to him much like walnuts. "I take no count of their shells," he told me long ago. "Their shells are much of a muchness; but I love 'em all, high and low, for the kernel within, which is their souls." Of course I couldn't explain to him that wasn't love, nor anything like it. If you don't feel to people much more than you feel to walnuts, then 'tis idle to talk of loving them. In truth dear old Matthew Appleby's opinions were pretty near on all fours with those of David Gollop, though he would have been greatly annoyed to hear it.

But Micah Widecombe and my nurseling, Janice, came the nearest to understand, for the reason that both the smith and the girl had dearly loved Tom, not for his soul, but for himself, as I had. Each in a different way helped me to bear the blow, because each felt the blow. Tom had always been Widecombe's best and dearest friend and Micah thought a lot of my husband's judgment and respected his manner of life; while to Janice, as she herself often told me, he had always been a well-loved foster-father. Both were the poorer without him. The girl put her own life behind her for the full length of the war and spent her time nursing the sick and keeping close to me; while the man looked in as he was wont to do, knowing I liked to talk of Tom so long as the subject didn't weary other people. And it never wearied him. He said things that others might not well have understood.

"I miss his grave, Pete," he told me once—a thought that might have seemed uncanny to most, but went to my heart, because I'd oft felt just the same. When some folk die, their very graves can bring left-handed comfort to those who knew them best and lack them worst. I missed Tom's grave myself, for the salt sea swallows up the dust of the dead beyond our ministration or mark of love. You cannot tend the green waters like you can the green grass. But I always pictured him henceforth as ebbing and flowing with the waves—his body part of the sea and his soul safe in heaven.

So I went through that great tide-rip, tearing and smashing up the homes of a million others besides my own; and I finished my masterpiece of a jersey and hoped how it might comfort and hearten some other woman's husband by the name of Tom.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

FAR the longest twelve months ever I lived were those that followed my husband's death and I felt as if they were going to run on till the crack of doom. For a while I was just stranded in a back-water and off the village map. Other wives and mothers and sweethearts had something to talk upon and look forward to; but my part in the war and my pride in the war both came to naught when Tom went out. I sang pretty small and got used to wearing black and resolved never to don colour again. I lost my instinct to neighbour with other people and buzz about as usual, because all my little affairs seemed to have come to an end. I was more brow-beaten than ever I thought it possible to be and I took above a whole year to come back to myself. Even then I felt it a broken self to come back to. However, although struck silent and dumb for a long while, I wasn't petrified. Life may come up against a brick wall for you, but all manner of things are overtaking the people round about and you can't put your head in the sand and pretend that nothing is happening in general. I began to take notice, like folk who have been ill and have turned the corner. I picked up the threads presently and found I wasn't the only war-widow in Beesworthy by now. Pride came along with pain and I went to bed for many nights with Tom's medal, sent to me by the Royal Navy. He got the D.S.M. "for gallantry, perseverance and great devotion to duty in serving on H.M. ships in minesweeping operations in home and foreign waters." I keep it bright yet and bring it out for such as care to see.

Then happened things personal to myself that woke more cause for sadness. The Great War ended and I joined the army of the bereaved and praised the legions of the blessed dead who had helped England to win it. The flow of blood afield and tears at home both dried up; we were proud of our country and laughter was heard in the land again. But now there came a new sorrow for my family and another dropped from the ranks. My eldest sister, Primrose Ashbury, died and, being her last spoken wish, her husband respected it and brought her down from their Liverpool home to be buried with the Blanchards. Primrose was built much on the pattern of our mother and lived out her life so well and faithful and steadfast that her

husband's family, including Nicholas Ashbury himself, got to regard her as a sort of machine and never grasped the rare and wonderful kind of wife and mother she was. Nick, as I told him more than once, failed to know his luck with her, till it had sped. Having no experience of any other partner but Primrose, he always thought she was just ordinary and that all married women were much on the same pattern. However, in fullness of time he married again and then found the difference very quickly indeed, because the second couldn't hold a taper to my sister in any direction whatsoever. It showed me at the time how my great loss had soured my own nature, because I was unchristian enough to be rather glad Nick Ashbury's eyes were opened—though too late. Tom would have rebuked me for that and said it was mean and reminded me that Ashbury had been a good husband and father, as men go. But, with my better-half gone, there was no light to steady me except his father, and old Matthew now began to reach the end of his own tether pretty fast. He concentrated more than ever on the hereafter and cared less and less for this world and the people to be left in it after he was gone.

Janice took up her life where she had laid it down before the war and went off to study in London, coming back to me at the end of the first term. And then queer things happened to some young people at Beesworthy while she was away from me. The adventure circled about a place and turned on an ancient wonder—a legend as Mr. Townley called it—yet it was something still believed in by the older generation.

As to the people up against this legend, first there were Adam and Abel Parsons, twin young fellows who lived at High Chimneys Farm—a big holding three miles inland from Beesworthy and tolerable near the haunted place I am about to mention. The boys had come into High Chimneys freehold early in life on their father's death; and though still young—round about thirty and no more—they were clever farmers with character and carried on their business to advantage. I'd taken a fancy to them when they were nippers for they were a devoted pair, as like as two peas and much attached to each other. And I'd often felt, when seeing them together, how it must have been between me and my own twin, Herbert, if he'd lived to grow up. They hadn't much to grieve at in all their young lives and were not called to the war, because, being farmers, they were best let be to cultivate the nation's food; but it happened they came up against something now that might have led to a civil war between themselves. We knew them well and had seen a good bit of them in Tom's time. So much for them; then there was Luke Caunter, sheep and cowman at High Chimneys, a rare good chap, but afflicted with a

cough and a lot under the weather just now because he found more on his mind than it was strong enough to carry. He lived with his old mother in a cottage on the farm and he always swore his cough wasn't ruinous but only just a habit, caught from the sheep he tended, and nothing he wouldn't throw off some day when his outlook brightened. And his outlook happened to be a girl. A tall, nicely made, lean sort of man was Luke with a long face and wistful, doggy eyes. Shaved clean and kept himself clean and a good son to his mother; and he'd set his heart and soul on Dolly Bowden, the daughter of the head man at High Chimneys. Dolly was a strapping creature, pretty and kind-hearted and good company for her own generation. And the whole point of the situation so far was that she cared a lot for Luke. She was always at him to take more care of himself and eat more food, because her bouncing appetite almost shamed her compared with his poor one. However, though they understood each other pretty well, there did not look to be any hope for them, because old Bowden had his own ideas touching Dolly and they didn't include the cowman. He'd taken note of the friendship and spoken very short and sharp to Luke on the subject, and he'd also minced no words with his daughter but told her, once for all, that she ought to have more respect for herself and for him than to look twice at a broken-winded, humble chap like Caunter. She was not very strong-minded, for all her brave appearance, and her father frightened her a bit and cast her down also, though he couldn't stop her feeling deep affection for Luke. So, for the time being, the lovers were little comfort to each other and Dolly went more troubled than Luke, because she knew something he did not. And that was a hint from her father touching facts which had come to his attention. There things stood when the twins visited me as an old friend and well-wisher. But before I relate what they came about—a most comical reason in itself—I must first tell the legend of Aller Pool on which all the future was ordained to turn for them.

Aller Pool, which Mr. Appleby said, ought to be called "Alder Pool" because of the alder trees that circled round it, was inland more than a mile from Beesworthy, near High Chimneys and buried in big woodlands. Tom and I were fond of the peaceful spot and often took our walks there on Sundays, especially in bluebell time, because then the lone placed looked its best and fairest; but not a lot of folk cared overmuch to go there—especially by night. Such things stick in a youthful mind and though educated children laugh at them, they leave their mark and it's easier to be brave in daylight than after dark anyway. None had seen the ghost, but one or two aged people still lived who vowed that they had heard it, or else

their friends or relations had done so. It was a voice that spoke but once a year out of the depths of the pool and the story ran that on Midsummer midnight, those who cared to brave the ordeal, might learn a gloomy fact touching the parish and the name, or names, of those doomed to die within the next twelve months would be spoken clear out of the pool for any within earshot to know. No fish were said to be there, but the pool did not lack for life and plenty of coots and moorhens built their nests in the reed-bed at one end and water-rats neighboured in the banks. To the average man or woman, apart from the story about it, the place made them feel wisht, and even such as might have had their business there wouldn't work all alone. A wood-path ran upon one side of it, leading up through the trees to High Chimneys, and on the other side was a little beach of sand that skirted the water. All overgrown and tangled with thorn and briar it was, and lonely enough, for few ever went there save lovers, whose love had cast out fear. To me it spoke of Tom and I'd wander there yet sometimes and sit on a dead tree, where we had sat together, and wonder if, on the Midsummer midnight before he died, that ghost voice had spoken his name. If it did, there was no human ear to hear it, for none would have ventured near the place on that doom-laden night while their men were swallowed by the war.

Long ago Matthew once argued about Aller Pool with my father. Both had been brought up by those who believed in the pool, but while my father said it was a myth and would have none of it, Tom's father believed such a story couldn't have arisen out of nothing. He was fortified in his opinion, too, because his own grandfather had heard it. Matthew could remember the old man telling how he had listened to his own brother's name cried out by a deep, droning voice that came from the water. And sure enough, though a strong young fellow and in rude health, the man died inside twelve months, being killed when felling an elm tree during March of the following year. And old Matthew, though very sure it wasn't a good ghost that haunted Aller Pool, believed in it and guessed the phantom homed there by the will of God for reasons outside human knowledge.

But Matthew wouldn't laugh about it, because he thought it a wrongful thing to pry into the future of our neighbours, or try to learn which among them might be counted to fall next.

That was Aller Pool, and now I can set out to tell how one night the twins came to see me about the queer pass where they found themselves. They'd drop in sometimes for a chat and bring me a wedge of honey or a pound of cream from the farm—all out of their

old regard for Tom; but to-night they were come on their own business.

"You're so sensible, Mrs. Appleby," said Abel Parsons, "that Adam and I thought we couldn't do better than get a line on our quandary from you."

"Mr. Matthew has gone to bed," I answered, "and better you should ask him."

But they had chosen me and made no secret of their plight.

"It's like this," began Abel. "You go on sewing and just listen. You know Dolly Bowden?"

"I know her," I said. "A very nice maiden."

"Well, we're both in love with her and both want her," he explained. "Adam and I are so alike in every way, inside and out, that we agreed it wasn't very amazing we should both fall for the same girl, especially an outstanding one like Dolly, but you may say it doesn't so much depend on Dolly which of us gets her, but on ourselves."

He spoke with the vanity and confidence of youth, which was natural.

"What price Luke Caunter?" I asked, and they both laughed in my face.

"No price," answered Adam. "Do you think old Bowden would let her take a penniless man and one foot in the grave at that?"

"His cough could be mended easily enough," I replied, "but go on."

"Well, there you are. Nothing, of course, can come between me and Abel," went on his brother. "We can't both have her and it's waste of time both courting her, so the present point is which shall start. We thought to toss a coin. What do you say? Not any coin of mine and not any coin of Abel's, but a strange coin from another pocket. What do you say to that?"

"Just a question of which has first refusal," I said; but they objected to the word.

"There won't be any first refusal," declared Adam with utmost confidence. "You can bet your life on that, Mrs. Appleby."

I remembered an old fisherman faced with a difficult problem, and how a wise woman told him to decide.

"I wouldn't toss for her," I said. "I'd put the decision out of human hands and leave it to Providence. I'll do this if you like. I'll set two bones on the floor and call one 'Adam' and one 'Abel.' Then I'll bring my dog—Tom's dog he was—and leave it to him. If he goes for the right bone, then Abel can try his luck, and if he chooses the left one, then it will be you, Adam."

They applauded, so I got the bones and called in the dog from his kennel and much surprised him with the sight of an unexpected treat after bedtime. We had everything quite clear and when I let him go he didn't waste a moment. He went straight for the left one and I let him take it to bed with him.

Abel uttered a cheerful curse but kept his nerve and shook his brother's hand.

"Be damned to the dog and good luck to you, Adam," he said, and both evidently regarded the matter as settled and the thought that it was all over left Abel a bit flat and Adam divided between joy for himself and regret for his brother. It was quite clear that they regarded the business as finished, so I couldn't help asking a question before they went.

"What shall you do, Abel, if Dolly turns down Adam?" I inquired.

"Nothing," he answered. "Nothing as to Dolly, because if she don't fancy Adam, she wouldn't fancy me. We're too much alike to look different in her eyes; and if she was mad enough to turn him down, that would be the end of it. But she won't turn him down. She's no fool and her father's no fool. It was only a question of first come, first served."

Off they went together quite amiably, but I didn't share their confidence as to whether it would fall out so pat as they expected. What Dolly Bowden might do I knew not and the only one I felt sorry for was the coughing cowman.

Neither twin favoured me for a good long while after that and there came no news as to whether Adam had triumphed. Then Abel dropped in one evening alone and asked for a sitting of eggs from my famous Barnevelders and talked poultry for a bit. But presently he began on the subject of his brother. He'd changed his mind as to Dolly being no fool, because things had happened to make him convinced she must be.

"You'll be surprised to hear that Adam hasn't brought it off as yet," he said. "That girl hangs fire and, when he offered for her, she wasn't in his arms the minute after. She wanted time! But he made her promise to be sharp and use the little brains God gave her."

"Adam could never go on wanting her if she'd made it clear she doesn't want him," I suggested, but Abel didn't see that.

"He's quite as wishful for her good as for his own," he explained. "Damn it all, he loves the woman!"

"She's wise to ask for time to think at any rate," I suggested, and he showed impatience.

"What does the idiot want to think about, Mrs. Appleby?"

"About Luke Caunter no doubt," I said.

"A creature bound for an early grave most likely! How could any woman think twice between him and my brother? Once let her see sense and Caunter would pester her no more. One thing's certain: if she was lunatic enough to put Caunter before Adam, then we'd sack the man."

That was the first time I'd ever heard a mean, or crafty, or unsportsmanlike word from a Parsons, but I said nothing for the minute. It looked a lost battle because poor Luke had two to one against him. In fact he had the whole of High Chimneys against him, for the mother of the twins took their side and approved of Dolly Bowden for Adam, while the girl's father was all for it too. It seemed little likely she could weather the storm with none but Caunter himself to help her and the knowledge that he'd be dismissed if she decided for him.

Then Abel went on to tell what a good twin he had been.

"I've played a brother's part," he said. "I've gone so far as to lecture the woman myself. 'Instead of daring to hesitate for a moment,' I said, 'you ought to thank your Maker for a chance of advancement that happens to few girls in your position. To marry my brother lifts you into a far finer walk of life than ever you had the right to hope for, Dolly.' "

"And what did she say to that?" I asked.

"It wasn't for her to say anything. Her part was to listen," replied Abel. "I also told her that to try and hold the balance between Caunter and Adam was little less than an insult to my brother, and, if she didn't mend her manners pretty quick, he would turn against her and be done with her. Between ourselves, Mrs. Appleby, that isn't true, because Adam finds himself deeper in love with her than ever and wouldn't lose her now for a fortune. He wants her and he's puzzled to know what holds her back. He can't believe it's Caunter, because, when he begged her to see the difference between what Luke had to offer and what he had, she was mute."

"If she loves Luke, then the sundries that Adam can promise wouldn't weigh a button against your cowman," I assured him; but you could see that Abel didn't know a thing about real love.

He asked me for some ideas to help Dolly's scant wits and was disappointed when I didn't admire his opinions, or feel disposed to support his twin.

"And as for dismissing Caunter," I said, "that would be a most cowardly thing. Also a foolish thing, because it might well serve to settle her once for all against Adam. Anyway that's how it would serve me. If you catch a man you could love going to do something beastly, it would sure shake you off him."

"Time will show," he answered, "but it might be the right course all the same, because, once that chap is out of sight and gone beyond reach, she'll probably forget all about him. She's heard us, and she's heard our mother, and she's heard her own father, and a cloud of witnesses like that ought to do the trick."

So he went off and, before I saw him again, there came to me Dolly herself, bringing Luke Caunter with her. You could see they were still of a mind, but I marked how running water will soften a stone, for the girl sounded to be yielding against the voices brought against her.

"Of course I love Luke terrible well and always have done and love is love, but what would you say was our course to take, dear Mrs. Appleby?" asked Dolly. "Luke don't see no light. He just hangs on our undying love for each other, but gets no ideas from it to help the situation, and I'm little better than a toad under a harrow, because I've only got my huge affection for Luke to pit against 'em and they don't believe it's true. They can't see how any sane creature would waste her devotion on a poor man with a churchyard cough while there was a hale and hearty chap like Adam Parsons gone on her. And they also say that if my happiness was what Luke put first in his mind, then he'd be the first to tell me to marry Adam."

"That be damned for a yarn," began Caunter. "That's just their craft and cruelty. What happiness ever overtook a woman who wedded to please other people? What's money, or Adam Parsons, or High Chimneys against Dolly's love of me? And as for my churchyard cough, that be damned too, Dolly."

"The folks all looked at you with pitying eyes, Luke, at church last Sunday, when it catched you in the middle of the sermon," she said.

"A bit noisy but perfectly harmless," he answered. "I'm a thin sort of man, granted, so was my father, and he'd be alive yet if he wasn't dead. The cough's curable and if I didn't fret my soul out over you and lose my appetite in consequence, the cough would most likely go. I'm tough enough and I know my job, and even if they fired me, I'd do so well if not better some place else."

"I know that," agreed Dolly. "You are cleverer than they think for."

Then they turned to me.

"The question is," said Dolly presently, "if there's any direct action for us to take about it. If I said 'yes' to Adam, that puts Luke in fearful agony for a bit, but once out of his sufferings he'll get over it soon or late. But it wouldn't put me out of my sufferings, because if I was wed to Adam Parsons for a hundred years, I could

never come to love him. Get used to him no doubt and do my duty by him, but not love him. If you have loved anybody like I love Luke, then it's idle telling yourself you can ever love like that again. No woman's built to do it twice."

Caunter fixed his shining eyes upon her while she spoke and nodded his head vigorously. I didn't mark anything unhealthy about him.

"Every word as true as gospel," he said.

"Such love is a tower of strength," I agreed, "but doesn't call for any direct action except in one particular, Luke. There's one thing you can do—one thing you ought to do—and, if the result goes against you, then I'd say your course looks to be clear; but if the result is what all your good friends hope, then it will be a great support for you both."

"There!" cried Dolly. "I knew Mrs. Appleby would have an idea."

"Don't amount to an idea," I answered, "but if Luke does one thing, he will clear up any more talk and give you both something firm to stand upon."

"What is it then?" asked Caunter. "I don't take your meaning yet, Mrs. Appleby."

"Why, your health," I explained. "Get your state of health cleared up once for all. That's the first thing."

"His mother's been at him about that for a month of Sundays," said Dolly, "but he won't—says it would make him look a fool to go whining to Doctor Tanner about nothing."

"Quite the contrary," I answered. "It isn't nothing and should be looked into. If it's nothing, then doctor will put you in the way to cure it. And if it is serious and you are like to be an invalid, then you must be brave and put Dolly first and let her go free."

"Hell!" said Caunter. "Is that all you can hit upon, dear Mrs. Appleby?"

"For the minute, yes," I replied. "Not for one instant moment do I believe you will hear any bad news, because I know the look of men and I don't see any signs of a declinement, or any serious ills about you. But let Dr. Tanner do his task. Then you and Dolly will feel a lot easier in your minds and be tuned to win out and carry on."

There wasn't much comfort in their young hearts from that, but they thanked me and promised to obey and went off together.

"Wear flannel next your skin at all times, Luke, and don't breathe the night air more than you must." That was the last word I said to the man for the moment, and he promised to bear it in mind.

I felt, when they were gone, that Luke was no fighter and the

girl beginning to feel shaken, and feared for them still more when Abel looked in to report progress. He'd quite lost whatever admiration he might once have felt for Dolly, but admitted his brother still wanted her above all else.

"The end of the battle is sure enough," he said. "The girl's weakening, so Adam says, and the marvel is she's held out so long. If it had been me, I wouldn't have put up with it like my brother has. If she'd said 'no' to me but once, I wouldn't have given her another chance to change her mind. I'm prouder than what Adam is—and cleverer too."

"How did you find that out, Abel?" I asked, "or was it your brother found it out?"

He laughed.

"You'll hear someday perhaps," he answered, "but he'll have his Dolly in the bag before much longer. And that will be the end of the rumpus and the end of Luke Caunter and his sheep-dog bark."

Abel felt very confident, yet when I asked him why he was so sure the scales were going to tip in favour of his brother, he only answered "Wait and see." Which was a phrase started by the Prime Minister of England a few years back, and still very popular. He would reveal nothing, but in truth he had revealed quite a lot, though I only caught the weight of his words long after. Away he went—evidently much pleased to find he had got brighter wits than his brother.

A week passed and I saw nothing of any among them until the next scene opened for me in a most uncanny fashion. I'd gone to bed as usual round about ten o'clock and father Appleby was already gone when there came a knocking at the outer door and I heard voices clashing wildly together—a man and a frantic woman by the sound. So I oped my window and cried out to them to be at peace and said I would come down house as quickly as I could don my clothes. I lit a candle and saw the time was half after midnight and the night dark and overcast. Father didn't waken and I rayed myself and descended to find Luke and Dolly in a proper uproar of misery, and when I asked them why they'd brought their misfortunes to me at such an improper hour, they couldn't tell.

"Something drove us to run to you, though God, He only knows why, come to think of it," answered Caunter. He was white as a dog's tooth and no hat and only his shirt and trousers upon him, though a damp and foggy night for June, and Dolly looked to be beside herself and not accountable for her actions or her tear-choked words.

"What the mischief has happened to you both now?" I asked. "The pair of you look to have seen a ghost."

"Dolly's heard one," answered Luke. "Poor dear maid—she's heard one! I'm for it, Mrs. Appleby."

I bade them come in.

"You had best to calm down and tell what you have got to tell," I said. "It's clear something has happened to shake the sense out of your bodies. Button your shirt, Luke, and put on Mr. Appleby's overcoat for the minute. Come in and I'll fetch you something to steady you."

With that they entered my house-place and I brought a bottle out of a cupboard and, for the minute, my mind fastened on that bottle of sloe gin rather than them. It had never been opened, because I'd bought it against Tom's next home-coming, but there was no home-coming for him, and I wondered sometimes when, if ever, I should open it. Now the answer was come and I gave each of them a china mug half full and told them to let it down.

"Answer me one question, Luke," I said, "before you tell your story. Have you been to Dr. Tanner as you promised?"

"I've moved in that matter," he answered, "and the gentleman's fixed the date. I was to see him early to-morrow, before he went on his rounds after my morning milking. I was to be present at his surgery at eight-thirty sharp and so intended. But it's too late now."

"Why is it too late?" I asked.

Then I looked at Dolly, who was drinking her cordial one minute and sobbing into it the next.

"The story's hers, poor suffering soul," said Luke and then spoke to her.

"Pull yourself together, darling, and set it all out again for Mrs. Appleby to hear the fatal news," he begged.

She nodded and gasped and gurgled and was still shaking like a jelly-fish, but the sloe-gin steadied her and brought back the colour into her cheeks.

"It was like this," began Dolly. "Under orders from my father I went to High Chimneys last night to take supper with the family and have a tell. Night and day Adam Parsons has been at me and, to-night, his mother and his brother joined in and piled up the arguments why I should give over holding out against Adam and say the word and do what Mrs. Parsons said was my duty and the will of Providence. They buzzed on till I grew dazed and so dumb as a newt; and time passed and I felt the fight was out of my body and only prayed to be allowed to go home. Abel gave over first and said he was tired and must seek his rest because he had to be up early, and then, when it was trembling on my lips to say 'yes' and have done with it, Adam called attention to the time and they were shocked to

see it past eleven o'clock. So his mother said I must go home, else father would be in a stir, and Adam decreed I couldn't go home alone at such an hour and he'd see me back through the woods to safety and bring a new contrivance he had by now—an electrical torch to guide our going."

Dolly panted a bit and picked up her mug, but it was empty by now and I poured in a little more.

"You went by the woodpath, past Aller Pool," I said.

"We did then," she continued, "and he was at me like a cat after a mouse and I was at my last gasp by now and the fog around us and so black as pitch under the trees. God's my judge, Mrs. Appleby, that as we skirted the pool, I was just going to tell him I'd shot my bolt, and could fight no more and would take him when he willed—yes, I was going to do it! Then that happened to freeze me all through and strike me dumb."

"She heard the spirit of the pool," said Luke. "Nobody in all that uproar aimed against her had stopped for a moment to remember it was Midsummer Night, else of course the man wouldn't have dared to take her there, or go himself either; but so it was and they stood by the pool at the fatal hour, Mrs. Appleby, and both heard the voice!"

"Let her tell her tale," I answered. "If you heard a voice, it said something. What did it say, Dolly?"

"Two words," she replied. "Two words and no more. Two words repeated three times in a blood-curdling, creepy-crawly voice straight out of the pool. 'Luke Caunter—Luke Caunter—Luke Caunter.' That's what it said—in a sort of wail like a doom bell tolling. Then it died away and everything was silent as the grave."

I couldn't but think she'd related the story very well.

"Sure it wasn't an owl, Dolly?" I asked, "or just Luke's name running in your head at that critical moment?"

"My head was full of him the second after, but not before," she answered. "And no owl, Mrs. Appleby. How should an owl be telling about poor dear Luke?'

"Go on," I begged her. "Keep to the exact facts. What happened next?"

"Adam shook with fear and cried out he'd quite forgot it was Midsummer Night. 'Lord have mercy!' he said, 'there's the truth from the spirit that haunts this infernal place. Spoke to help you make up your mind, Dolly. Come away quick I'm goose-flesh all over!'"

"Well he might be," added Luke.

"But then," went on the girl, "very strange thoughts flowed into

me and my mind was full of Luke and empty of Adam. My flesh creamed on my bones and my knees knocked together, but only for a moment, and I felt what a cruel piece of work it was for even a hateful ghost to turn against him. Then a great flood of anger rose up in me and a great flood of love for Luke at the same minute. And I knew, for dead sure, he was the proper mate for me and I'd never be happy again till I'd married the man, even if he was called home the next minute after I had. That's how I felt, Mrs. Appleby."

"Did you tell Adam?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'd got a feeling against him properly choking me by now. I didn't say a single word. I gave one screech—loud enough to fright the filthy ghost if he was there yet—and then I bolted. I ran with all the swiftness I'd got, though a chancey place to run in the dark; but I don't travel very fast as a rule and, when he saw how I'd fled, Adam came after me. I knew he'd catch me in half a minute and a light flashed out, because he'd turned on his torch, so I got off the path and hid in the bushes behind a stone. That's why my face is bleeding along of thorns. He went by cussing and showing his light, but all in vain because I squatted behind the stone like a hare in her form. I knew he'd have to come back the same way and, half an hour later, he did come back talking aloud to himself and using shameful language too."

"Because the cup of happiness was dashed from his lips just when he counted to drink it," put in Luke Caunter.

"Then," continued Dolly, "I knew I was safe and had given him the slip; and now I'll wed Luke against the world and if die he must, it shan't be before I've shared his woeful life so long as it lasts. I'll defy all the demons and humans leagued up against us and marry him if 'tis only for five minutes, the blessed creature!"

She sobbed on Luke's chest for a little while, but, between the shock of hearing his doom and the amazement to find Dolly in his arms, the cowman couldn't summon any more words at all for the time being. He just hugged her and stared over her fallen hair out of his beautiful eyes at me.

Then he asked me a question.

"How could a man possibly die after he's heard that?" he said. "How should I die after she's for me and wants no other?"

"I'm very glad you woke me," I said. "Because there's something deeper in this adventure than I can explain for the minute. But don't take any action at all to-morrow. Just carry on with your lives and meantime, I'll piece the tale out and see what Mr. Appleby thinks when he hears it. And if Abel tells you what Adam heard keep your nerve, Luke, and don't let him think you're particula,

under the weather about it. What you have got to do is to see Dr. Tanner at half-past eight to-morrow morning, and now Dolly had best let you take her home, unless she reckons her home will be too hot to hold her after this night's work."

Dolly agreed to go home.

"Not till to-morrow it won't be too hot," she said. "Father will be asleep long since; but he'll ask me how I got on last night at High Chimneys for certain and expect to hear I've given in."

"Handle him gently and say nothing has yet been decided by you," I advised.

They went off then—nearly one o'clock it was and a sea mist over the land. Luke was resigned and Dolly proved a bit unsteady on her feet, but otherwise in pretty fair spirits and full of defiance against Providence.

"I'll let you know the moment we hear what doctor decrees, and God bless you for your support, Mrs. Appleby," said Luke.

Then they faded away into the dark and I went to bed.

CHAPTER II

IT was quite a new thing in my experience to be so deeply interested in other people's business as I was over this queer tale of Luke and Dolly; but I never felt to be busy now and I'd often think what a frozen time a widow is called to face, when her partner and all he means and demands is taken from her. So, for want of something better to do, I turned to think on these two young creatures crossed in love. And the subject grew more and more interesting when I looked behind it. First there was the ghost fitting so tidily into Adam's plan of action just at the moment when Dolly's fight was over and she had decided to throw up the sponge and take him. Yet what had actually happened in the girl's wavering mind? Instead of yielding, she'd done clean contrary and turned against him. If the Aller Pool ghost had only kept his mouth shut then, in half a minute more, she would have been tokened to young Parsons and most likely married to him inside six weeks; but now the phantom had ruined Adam's hopes. There was a terrible funny side to it, especially if my guess about the spirit was the right one, and next morning I told old Matthew the whole tale.

At breakfast I put a question.

"What do you hold about the legend of Aller Pool, Father?" I asked. "It was brought to my mind last night."

"I hold and always shall hold to one opinion, Pete," he answered. "There is no shadow of doubt that the ghost used to speak on Midsummer Night in the past. Witnesses beyond reproach heard it and when a name was named, be it man or woman, the victim died. And one famous case belonged to Ann Woodman. She married Gabriel Woodman and had a son by him, and she called the boy Gabriel after his father. Then, when the infant was three years old, forgetting all about the pool, she passed that way on her road home at midnight from nursing her sick mother. And what happened? She heard a spirit speak three times and the name was 'Gabriel Woodman.' And I have always felt mortal sorry for that afflicted woman, for she couldn't tell whether it was her husband or her baby she was going to lose and never thought to ask the spirit. So, not until the child died six months after, did Ann have another moment's peace."

"Poor creature—I wonder which she might have chosen if open to do so," I said. "And what a cruel choice!"

"But now," continued Matthew Appleby, "the case is altered and I am of opinion that ghost has long left the pool. All manner of tasks are surely put upon the departed and no living man can say what his first job of work in eternity may be; but most like he's at another now."

"Then," I said, "if I told you that the voice spoke yet again last night and named a name and there were two living creatures—a man and a girl—to hear it, what would you think?"

"I should doubt they were mistaken," he answered. "I should want to know who was doomed and why those two particular people had been by the pool at midnight."

"Very clever of you, Father," I assured him, "and I can answer both questions."

Then I told him the whole story and he listened most carefully and forgot his breakfast while doing so. My own ideas were ripened by now, but I said nothing as to them and waited for his opinion.

"That's what happened and that's how it is," I finished up. "And does the story prove your own opinion about Aller Pool is wrong?"

Then he showed how clear and quick-moving his old mind still continued to be.

"None has ever heard a word to my knowledge against the Parsons twins," he said, "but you have got to remember this: that when a man is in love, he often lets the passion overmaster his principles and Nature, for her own ends, will battle against his conscience."

"All's fair in love, Father," I said, "but he shook his head.

"So we say and so some act upon," he admitted. "But it doesn't hold good against religion. No matter for that. Now I speak of evidence, and you may answer there can be no evidence because a ghost wouldn't be capable of leaving any clues."

"It must have got a throat whatever it hasn't got," I argued, "even a ghost can't bawl out anybody's name without a mouth and a tongue in it."

"Let me go on," he begged. "We're either dealing with a phantom or we are not. Grant a miracle, then a voice without a tongue is to be accepted; but miracles are rarer far than of old and my own opinion continues to be that the miracle of Aller Pool is a thing of the past. So we must consider if this happening can be explained some other way. It can be, and though the explanation throws a very bad light on certain living people, yet it looks more likely there's a screw loose in their characters than a miracle at Aller Pool."

"You're a wonder!" I told him. "You have reached to just where I have reached, Father; but on sure ground, whereas I only guessed it might be that way."

"That's the difference between a woman's reasoning powers and a man's," he explained. "But where are we now?"

"The proof will be if Doctor Tanner finds Luke curable," I suggested, but he attached no importance to that.

"No. He might be sound as a bell to-day and dead as a hammer to-morrow. We must approach the subject from another point of view and ask ourselves if it was in the power of a human being to pretend the ghost was there."

"The voice was 'creepy-crawly'—that was Dolly's word for it; but, of course, a human being can put on a creepy-crawly voice if they want to," I told him. "Janice—last time she came to see me—imitated a ghost in one of her stories and made me feel it was brooding at my elbow. But there's far more to it than that. The voice came from the midst of the pool, or so it sounded to Dolly Bowden; but, if a human voice, it couldn't have come from there."

"In that case it came from the other side of the water and fetched across out of the darkness," said Mr. Appleby. "So if we surmise that Abel Parsons was helping his brother to make the girl accept him and finish off Caunter once for all, then we must consider where Abel was just then."

"He'd gone to bed, or so he said," I put in.

"We have to assume for the minute that he did no such thing, but bolted out of the house and took up his stand on the other side

of the pool. In that case evidence may be looked for and found and craft may be met with craft."

"There's a little strip of black sand on the farther side," I said.

"And that's where a man might stand and fling his voice across if so minded" went on Matthew. "But, if Abel did so, then a hundred to one, he would have left some mark of so doing. That's in your power to find out, Pete, and you can see if the sand on the hither side of the water has been touched by a human foot of late."

So, at the dinner hour I slipped out and took my way through the empty woods unmarked. All was lone enough there with naught but a woodpecker laughing as he flew. None saw me and I pushed my way through the thickets to the little strand, but didn't need to stay half a minute, for marks showed, clear as day, where feet had trod but twelve hours before. A child could have marked it and I was off and home again in no time.

"The sand told its tale, Father," I said. "Somebody has walked there and stood at water's edge and his footprints are clear, so clear."

Then Mr. Appleby praised God in his most enthusiastic fashion.

"There you are then," cried out old Matthew, beaming as he spoke. "A wondrous example of how Providence, when so disposed, can kill two birds with one stone and defeat the unrighteous and serve the innocent at a single stroke! Such things are mysteries planned in the mind of our Creator, Pete."

But my thoughts ran forward.

"All looks to hang on Doctor Tanner now," I suggested. "If he says Caunter can be cured, then all's well; but how will it be if the young man has got a fatal complaint and may fall before another winter? Then the people would say afterwards that it was a thousand pities she hadn't taken Parsons when he was on offer and that Providence had been mistook to choke her off him."

"The Godless might and most likely would," he answered, "yet to the eye of faith these things foretell what is to follow them. You mark my words; we shall hear Luke is curable and that was all part of the eternal plan. Such events wouldn't have fallen out if the cowman was going to die, and because they did fall out, that's a sure sign he isn't going to die."

He spoke with the faith that moves mountains, so I admired him for it and felt almost ashamed to have suggested a downfall yet for poor Luke. But neither of us was called to wait very long, for the lovers came in that evening bubbling with joy and gladness, yet very doubtful whether in truth they had over-much to be joyful for.

"We're in a proper miz-maze now, Mrs. Appleby," began Luke. "Wonders never cease, and firstly I'm not doomed in Dr. Tanner's

opinion. He brought all his learning to bear upon me and looked down my throat with an electric lamp and listened to my heart and lungs at work and charged half a crown and no more. I'm sound as a bell by all accounts and my hideous cough don't arise from any fatal breakdown within, but a nervous condition that has bred the habit and always drives me at the most ill-convenient moments. It arises out of a troubled mind and poor courage and has grown into a failing which I must knit up my will-power to conquer. And, if I have enough pluck, I shall cure it in six months or less. And Dr. Tanner made me feel brave as a lion and, besides all that, there's Dolly now to brace me up."

"All very much to the good, Luke," said father, who had been listening to their tale.

"So one load has fallen from us now," went on Dolly taking up the tale, "the worst load of all; but next comes the ghost, Mr. Appleby. That's the next ugly item. Because the Aller Pool ghost would be powerfuller even than Doctor Tanner, if you take my meaning, and slay Luke some other way."

Then father told how we read it and cheered their hearts again. He spoke with absolute certainty and revealed everything down to my discovery.

"That being so, then praise God for all His mercies and enough said," summed up Luke. "I'm going to live, and there never was any right ghost to say contrary if Mr. Appleby ordains the spirit is off and away. But the present moment continues to be ugly yet."

"What's the matter with the present, Luke?" I asked. "For the present all you need to do is to fight your silly cough and conquer it and carry on."

"That I will do good and sure," he promised. "But the present is like this. We're both for declaring that we are tokened, and the moment that is blazed abroad I shall get the sack from High Chimneys and Dolly will find herself homeless, because her father has told her he will cast her out once and for ever if she takes me. You'll excuse me mentioning it, but so it is."

"If your story got out, and their plot got out, all the sympathy would be your side, Luke," I told him, "and you might find that Mr. Bowden would be too ashamed to cut off Dolly and the Parsons too ashamed to fire you. They'd be the disgrace of the parish."

"In a case such as this," Matt decided, "the proper response is to take the war into the enemy's country and surprise 'em. What I advise you to do is this: let Luke give notice before he gets it, and if your father tells you that he won't have you under his roof any more

Dolly, you must be so placed that you can tell him you have made arrangements to go."

"To go where, Mr. Appleby?" asked Dolly; but I was delighted at the idea of them both taking a high hand.

"You can come here, as long as you please," I said to Dolly. "Come and welcome. Father's dead right, and that fixes you till Luke gets a new place. I wouldn't say if my own brother may not be his next master, because there are changes at Birch Hanger this autumn. And if Luke got there, he'd work on higher ground and not be called to face the winter fogs at High Chimneys."

"Providence again!" added old Appleby. "Proof positive that justice is set to conquer."

They were overjoyed at hearing such bold advice and promised to follow it. Instead of terrifying them to find they were a nine days' wonder, it did them good and gave them a hopefuller conceit of themselves.

Luke put in his notice the next morning, and on the following evening, he brought Dolly's luggage on a hand-barrow to us and stopped a bit. She had arrived already and told us how it went with her father.

"Everything fell out as Mr. Appleby prophesied it would do," she said, "and it shows that, if you know somebody is going to give you a nasty one, the right way is to begin first and give them a still nastier one. Luke has told Adam Parsons he is going to marry me and will be leaving High Chimneys at the end of another month."

"And what did he say?" asked Matthew.

"He looked me up and down as if I was a beetle," answered the cowman, "and wanted to know if Dolly Bowden had told me what she heard at Aller Pool. And I said I had come by all she had to tell and also all Dr. Tanner had to tell. 'On hearing of the voice, Mr. Parsons,' I said, 'I consulted my medical man and he found that I was sound in every item and offering to live out my natural span.' And more than that I told him. Next I said, 'As for that noise Dolly heard in the dark along with you at Aller Pool, we also know who it was that stood and hooted his lies from t'other side of the pond.'"

"Well done you!" said Mr. Appleby, who was much gratified.

A great triumph for justice and plain dealing it turned out to be, because, when I related the story to my brother, Aaron, he was a good bit taken by it and had Luke to see him. The Caunters went to live at Birch Hanger in due season and took Luke's mother with them to the cowman's cottage; but before they wed, the story naturally traversed through Beesworthy on one tongue and another and folk laughed, which must have been a parlous jar for the twins. As for

Luke, his happiness and success soon helped him to overcome his troubles and, after he married, his cough disappeared and he began to put on a bit of flesh.

Janice came on her summer holiday before Dolly was gone, and she liked the girl too. My treasure had taken prizes that year and made progress in her profession and round about then, as I remember, she drew my attention to certain happenings, which in truth I felt quite aware of myself and had given me occasion for thought. We were grown close as mother and daughter for years now and my welfare was dear to her, her love welcome and her well-meaning not in doubt.

It was of Micah Widecombe, Janice had to tell one evening when Dolly was out with Luke and old Matthew gone to bed. For he retired very early now, though still quick to rise. My foster-daughter flitted in and out of my life like a butterfly in a dull room, or a song-bird to cheer a dull day, and she always heartened me and wouldn't leave me until she had done so. She loved to go round about and see her old friends and was welcome when she did. In fact she lived in two worlds—her own, far away, and her old childhood's world. For some reason I could always talk to her more freely about Tom than to any other and something that I said started it.

"If you live all your life in one place, Janice," I told her, "then when you come to be really old, it's natural that your friends and most of your relations should have taken their last journey before you have. I am not nearly so old as that myself yet, but I know one or two who are, and they declare that if they want to join a rally of neighbours, they go and walk among the assemblies of the dead and refresh their memories in the churchyard. So do I, but not in a mournful spirit, my love. Only just to be reminded of friendly names. And I've marked that, such is the spread of education, you'll find the rhymes and sayings on the old stones quite out of fashion now.

"For my part," I continued, "I find memory works brightest in dreams."

"Happy dreams I hope, Mother," she said, for she continued to call me "mother" as she had of old at her own wish.

"Yes, so far as a vision can be happy," I granted. "My pillow is cruel thorny some sleepless nights when I can't get Tom out of my mind; whereas on other nights, though he has not been in my brain all day, he enters into my sleep as real as life. But he never comes as last I saw him—growing old with grey in his red hair and lines on his face and care for the war in his eyes. Most always from the far past of our days he comes—joyous and hopeful and young."

I rambled on about my dreams and, by that roundabout road, Janice came to Micah Widecombe and told me what I knew already. None else knew, or would have had the face to name it if they did, but Janice was different, because, though not quite twenty years old yet, she already could look under the surface of a situation.

"After you and me," she said, "Mr. Widecombe felt most deeply when dear foster-father died for England. If he ever dreams, he dreams of him sometimes."

"He well might," I agreed.

"Of course you know that he's very fond of you, Mother," she said.

"He may or may not be," I answered, "and I'm glad you noticed it, because there are things I can say to you I cannot to Tom's father or any other. To the old man you see, his son is merely out of sight, round the corner, waiting for me to join him again. Times without count I've heard him say that the widow who takes another is breaking her marriage vows and he feels positive sure I agree with him and that Widecombe also agrees with him. If old Matt thought otherwise he'd bid Micah never darken the door again. Once married, always married, and man and wife will come together again for eternity. It just shows what a proper mess we get in if we think to take our human manners and customs to heaven with us."

Janice laughed at that, but saw the point for Micah.

"He wouldn't do anything to vex Mr. Appleby for the world, of course," she said.

"Not willingly," I answered, "though it's tiresome for anybody to bring you to the judgment seat of his opinions without regard for what your own opinions happen to be. But on the subject of the hereafter, the dear man reckons he knows so much more than anybody else that argument would be mad. I don't argue, and that holds for Micah, too. He just sits and smokes his pipe and listens."

"You never mention such things to Micah when Mr. Appleby isn't there?"

"Oh yes I do—and get a laugh out of him sometimes," I answered, then changed the subject.

"You see," I went on, "work is changing in the smithy. Newfangled machines are creeping out on the land, like monstrous animals, and the horses get fewer and fewer. Micah's a master of machinery and his new hand is all for motor traction. He's got no particular love of horses like Micah has. Fred Vosper he's called; but there are still horses to fill Micah's time."

Janice nodded.

"No man ever put in a bigger life of hard work than Mr. Widecombe," she said.

"He deserves a happy home and a tidy sort of woman to watch over him," I agreed.

"There's only one woman in his mind, however," murmured Janice.

"I know, and you're right when you say he's fond of me," I told her. "He's a link with the past and, being a dear friend of Tom's I shouldn't feel I was doing anything contrary to his wishes if I took him. Tom never saw any harm in a second and often wished his father would take another. It may sound rather a horrible thing to say, my love, because it's always horrible for anybody's future life to turn on somebody else's future death; but Micah probably feels the subject must be kept in cold storage, till dear Matt goes to his rest."

"Very difficult," she said.

"No—just one of those things time will solve," I replied. "There are two others besides you and me who know the problem, and that's my sister Phyllis, and my dear friend, Grace—Aaron's wife. And they both feel it would be a very nice thing to happen and that Micah's mistaken to hang fire and ought to speak and chance the result."

"He feels the promised land is in sight any way," said the girl.

It was my turn to laugh then.

"A pretty frosty sort of promised land—me," I answered. "And supposing we are all wrong and have mis-read the signs and quite mistook about Micah—a pretty old fool I should look if he had to break it to me he wasn't thinking of any such a prospect."

I thought a few moments and then went forward.

"To say the last word on a tricky subject, my blessed lass," I concluded, "you may be right and, some day, when you have gone back to your work, perhaps you shall hear whether I've cheered him up, or he's turned me down."

As I remember we went to Birch Hanger to supper that night and Janice persisted, knowing Grace and Phyllis would strongly support her. And afterwards, when Aaron was gone out, the three of them buzzed at me like a hive of bees till, to shut their mouths, I promised I would learn the smith's point of view.

"You push on with it, Pete," said Grace. "You've always had a man under your charge and you've been lost without one for three years after your brave Tom was called, and now you know the one you could do with, tell him so."

"And when Micah hears how it is, he will scorn old Matt's opinions," added Phyllis. "If you never took a step in any direction for fear of hurting somebody's corn, you'd stand stock still for the rest of your life."

CHAPTER III

I REMEMBER Mr. Townley once saying to me something like this after I'd made him laugh.

"You take the objective view of life, Pete, and that's very apt to promote a sense of humour if your bent is that way; while people who take the subjective view don't find so much to amuse them and existence is a more serious business in their eyes."

I didn't know what he was talking about at the time and don't up to the present moment. It is the same with the Reverend Tozer. I may have no idea of his meaning from the pulpit of a Sunday, yet will get more satisfaction from what I don't understand than from what I do. Just the flow of words comforts me—like a hot bath. Dear Tom shared my feelings in that matter. He'd listen to a brass band because the noise created a pleasant feeling in his mind, though he didn't know of any reason why it should. But none was quicker to see that confusion of thought must be avoided as a rule and he warned me time and again against the danger of pulling people's legs. "Don't you do it, Pete," Tom would say, "because such as can't see a joke are often the quickest to pick a quarrel." So I was armed against annoying my neighbours too often and felt I could trust myself to tackle Micah in a manner befitting such a delicate task. After my precious girl had gone back to her business, there came an evening when Micah dropped in for his pipe with Matthew, as he did twice or thrice a week, and remained for a tell with me after the old man was gone to bed. He found very little to say that night and did most of the listening, but he sighed more than usual, till I seemed to be hearing the bellows at the forge, rather than him, and his eyes were fixed more solemn and steady on me than I had known them to be before. So I plunged in.

"Let's get to the bottom of this, Micah, and do stop your heaving, and don't stare at me as if I was a freak of nature," I began on him. "But if your tongue is tied, then you ought to let your actions be restrained likewise. Of course I forgive you, my dear, because I think I understand you, and to understand is to forgive."

I felt this was a pretty bold start and gave him a chance to confess his feelings, but he didn't take it in very quickly. He just stared and I carried on.

"If I've read you aright, well and good," I said; "but if I have not, then you must blame yourself for putting such ideas into my head. As I see you at present, Micah, you have let your friendship for me

warm up into such high affection that you'd forswear your old vow, never to take another. That's where you stand in my opinion."

"Do I hear you, Pete?" he asked in a deep, booming tone of voice, with his eyes alight and his mane almost bristling in his excitement.

"Oh yes, you hear me all right," I replied. "But I've got more to say and if you can tell me I'm right so far, then I'll go forward and say it."

"That's where I do stand," he confessed, "and have for two years. When first it came upon me, I feared it to be the temptation of the Devil, so I put it from me again and again, yet never to say conquered it. Now and then I'd believe you was sacred to the dead and beyond reach of the living for evermore. And then hope dawned again and I was greedy to see if you kept fancy free as to the future; but I found you were not of the old man's mind on that subject. I strove to hide my feelings and felt the danger, but to your all-seeing eyes, it wasn't hid seemingly."

"If you felt the danger, that's to your credit," I said, "but now listen a bit longer. I care enough about you to think of your chances of happiness before my own, Micah, and I've told myself that it would better become you to take a maiden and rear children to gladden your old age, than anchor down your future to a widow who cannot offer any inducements of that sort. I've had my flowering time."

"You have," he argued, "and your fruit was nipped off the stalk never to ripen, Pete; and remember this: my own flowering time came to a sad end same as yours, and any second after your Tom must be a terrible bad second. That's granted; while in my case—well, we needn't return to my married life."

"Not for a moment," I said. "But if 'tis granted we have both had our first love and well know nothing like that could ever happen again—for good or ill—then we might find firm ground for a starting place."

"Put as only you put a situation," he agreed. "Nothing like Tom can ever be hoped for you, Pete, and, thank God, nothing like Jane could ever happen to me again along with you."

Of course, serious though we both were, I couldn't but laugh at that.

"No," I promised. "You're not very like to find me gadding with young Vosper. But the question is whether the boot might be on the other leg next time. Jane found you dull as ditchwater, but suppose you found me dull as ditchwater and short of all your hopes when it came to uniting your life with me?"

He shook his head.

"You know the answer to that," he replied. "To wed you would be heaven on earth for any man and beyond my deserving.

But I'd do my part. Heaven helping I'd rise to such high fortune. You can trust me, like you can trust Death, which never forgets nor fails, and I'd never forget nor fail you so long as life was in my body."

It wasn't a very happy image for a proposal of marriage, but what might have chilled another loving woman only amused me.

"You're as trustable as your horse-shoes," I answered, "and I feel no fear that, once wed, we'd ever want to part. You can count on me, my dear, same as I can count on you. But now we must face up to another reality beside the reality of loving each other. I may tell you now that I wondered why you didn't break the news sooner and left me to be so unwomanly as to tell you I knew it; but I see now what was the reason."

"Trust you to see everything," he replied. "The reason was old Matthew, and so far, he remains the reason still, Pete."

"He does," I agreed.

"If anybody living can get round that corner, you'd be the most like to do it," said Micah. "But I couldn't. So my instinct warned me against adventuring. He'd call in Tom's sacred name and say we were playing with fire and so on; but now the question arises whether he would take from you what he never would take from me."

"Not for a moment," I answered.

Micah nodded.

"Then we have got to come down to brass tacks," he told me. "Your affections for him and my respect for him are such that we wouldn't cause him pain and anger for the world. But did we ought to set our feelings for him higher than our feelings to each other?"

"Very nicely put, Micah," I answered, "and down to brass tacks as you say. If it was another party than Tom's father, I would pay no heed whatever. There's plenty would be very pleased to hear this news. But it would be a terrible cloud to know Mr. Appleby was against."

"How old is he and how long do you calculate he can be counted to live?" asked the smith. "If we decided for his feelings, then we must figure for how long. Time's time."

"Yes," I admitted. "When you have to balance the dear old man's life against our united happiness, it's natural for you to wonder how long."

"The gilt might be off the ginger-bread long before we came to eat it."

"Yes," I said, "and I can't think of anything more beastly unpleasant than waiting and watching, like two carrion crows, for him to draw his last breath. I doubt our self-respect would stand it."

"So do I," he agreed.

"He's seventy-eight," I continued, "and there's no particular reason why he shouldn't live another ten years."

"Hell!" said Micah and then apologised for using the word.

"Forgive that," he begged. "Just the shock of hearing a painful fact, Pete."

"We'll keep off his age," I advised, "and try other channels. And one thing is certain: this mustn't be known to anybody, else it will come to his ear."

Micah was with me there and we considered the problem from every point of view, only to be headed back to the vital point where the one difficulty looked to lie. We parted then and it was by the man's own cleverness that we kept something to go upon and decide about later.

"For the minute," he said, at the door and the moon shining, "take this suggestion to your mind and see how it looks till we meet again. Ask yourself how it would be if we leave the upshot in the hands of Providence for the space of one year. Then, if Higher Powers don't see fit to intervene, well and good and we take action."

I applauded this.

"A clever thought and worthy of you, Micah," I replied. "For the minute I can't think on anything happier."

When he was gone I went over the ground and weighed all up. I felt pleased and tolerable happy, because, though I couldn't imagine any other man than Micah to want me, and still less picture myself wanting any other man, there was that in his patient and peace-loving nature which echoed Tom not seldom and, above all, something told me that Tom himself, where he was now, would have felt no objection to me carrying on into middle-age with Micah. If one pang of conscience had arisen on that score, then I wouldn't have changed my widowed state for any man living; but conscience gave no sign against, so I couldn't see a thing to quarrel with and went to bed in a very gracious frame of mind.

They say that, by and large, men have got a keener sense of fun than we have; and that you may take to be true no doubt. In my own case I always found it far easier to make men laugh than women, yet always knew that for the hazards of married life a joker wasn't so trustable as one who saw nothing overmuch to rouse his amusement. So, though in itself a feat to make me smile that night, yet I couldn't but thank God how, seeing my weakness and how prone I was to poke fun where it wasn't wanted and often unwelcome, He had guarded me, both first and second, to two high-class partners who would keep me in order so far as they might. Tom, as I well remembered, often froze a dangerous joke upon my lips and Micah

could be trusted to quench any foolery improper at my age, so I got a glimpse of that saving blessing before I went to sleep.

Then time passed and we flowed along with it. The blacksmith told none, though to the seeing eye he couldn't hide his turn of luck and went about mysteriously cheerful, as if somebody had left him a fortune. As for me I only let Grace and Phyllis know they had got their wish and they promised to keep the secret safe; while to Janice I wrote it and she returned one of her pretty letters to say how happy she felt to hear the news. Only one thing made me feel uncomfortable off and on, and comparing notes with Micah, I found he suffered from the same. That was the need to hide our intentions from Mr. Appleby.

"I can't but feel sometimes as if I was a traitor to the dear old chap," said Micah once, "but the longer he lasts, the more bitter sure I feel it would be ruination if he hears the truth. He thinks, as I do, that you neighbour with the angels as never woman did before, and if he learned you favoured a second marriage, it might very well be the death of him."

"Same with you," I told the man. "You are an example of what he approves in every direction."

"I know he regards me like that and wish he didn't," confessed Micah, "I feel, Pete, how I'm sailing under false colours along with old Matt."

"To play a part is needful sometimes when it would only make a mess of somebody else's life if you didn't," I explained. "You've got to be devious now and again in this world unless you want the house out of windows and not a friend left in it. Sad, but true, Micah. Time's speeding and the appointed year will run out its course; then we won't play double any more."

Six months had in truth gone by ere now and the next overpowering interest to come for me was near at hand. At the end of that year, after she had joined a travelling theatre company on the way to perfection and was still learning her business with a touring group of performers, Janice found time to come and see me one Sunday. She was acting at Plymouth for one week and then was going to exhibit at Torquay for the next, so she got to me for some hours during the Sabbath between, and she didn't come alone. I was prepared for this, because she had fallen in love with a young man already on the stage and well thought upon. She had sent me his photograph and written me that he was a gentleman of private means and a great artist and a religious man. Certainly he was a very handsome one if his picture could be relied upon and I hoped he might be all she thought him. It came as no surprise that she

had fallen in love, for she was made to be loved; but I felt glad they ordained to wait some time before they joined forces. In any case they were carrying on with play-acting and hoped always to perform together in their plays. I felt very anxious to see him and judge how near he might be to my foster-daughter's opinions, so when he drove her to Beesworthy, it came as a great moment for all of us. He was some years older than Janice—twenty-six to be exact—and she had told me in one of her letters that his face and figure reminded people of a Greek statue. Well, he couldn't remind me of a Greek statue, because I'd never seen one, nor yet ever wanted to, but he was a very beautiful young fellow with wonderful eyes and a fine, thorough-bred figure and hands and feet out of the common. The quality was there, but no pride. He just behaved as the quality do behave most times in my experience. I knew in a minute he was straight and followed high standards. They arrived for our midday dinner and I had prepared a rare good meal and bought a bottle of red wine at the "Fisherman's Arms" for them. And when we sat down to it and Matthew carved a nice guinea-fowl, the young actor crossed his breast, but in a quiet fashion and not to call attention to the fact he was saying his grace to himself. Father didn't see his movements fortunately, for he would have felt uneasy if he had, but I marked them and knew the lad was a practising Christian, though of what persuasion I couldn't say. Morris Mayburn he was called and, though the sad and amazing crash that presently brought that hopeful tokening to naught, didn't separate the pair of them till a good few months later, the tale had best be told now, because it was in many ways the most wonderful I ever met with in all my life.

The first shadow fell after dinner, when Janice went into the garden with me, to look at the plants she knew and cared about, and young Mayburn sat and smoked indoors and listened to Mr. Appleby. "Shadow" I call it, but there didn't seem any shadow at the time, either for her or for him. It was only long after, looking back, that I saw where danger threatened. She told me how her young man was a Roman Catholic and had come from a famous old family, devoted to that faith for centuries.

"The interesting thing about Morris is this, Mother," she said, "that he has an elder brother and an uncle, both priests in the Roman Church, and that his people have always served in it. And at one time, between his devotion to art and to religion, Morris very nearly decided for the Church, because ministry is in his blood. However, after he found that he had great acting ability, he finally decided to go on the stage, and then he met me and found I was serious-minded too, and we fell in love. And now he feels we shall

minister together in the cause of art, because art can be a hand-maid to religion."

"That sounds very proper, my treasure," I answered.

"I'm glad you think so," she said, "but I doubt if Mr. Appleby would. Better not mention it to him, because he always told me that the Reformation was God's work to save Christianity from going to the Devil."

"He does run to extremes like that," I admitted, "being Church of England from his youth up; but so are you for that matter."

"Marriage is not denied between a man and a woman of different faith," she said, "and I don't really feel that our religion is different. No two people ever thought more alike than we do, or put their trust more completely in the same precious Saviour. And that being so, no vital thing divides us. Morris very much wants me to join his Church and I expect I shall do so, for differences don't alter the vital task of trying to be a good Christian."

"You feel that the various kinds of Christianity don't worry you so long as they all aim for the same goal, my love?"

"Yes, Mother. And that's what, of course, they do. Each has got its own rules, but all tend to one high purpose of making all the world Christian."

"There's a tolerable wide difference of rules between Romans and Salvationists," I suggested.

"I suppose there is, but, after all, human salvation is what they are both after," she said. "It would be so sad if Morris and I never kneel down together in the same church and worship together, and he sees a thousand reasons why we should, so I expect you will hear pretty soon I have gone over."

"Too deep waters for me to wade in," I told her, "but there's a lot to be said for it no doubt and I certainly wouldn't see any objection. But old Matt would, so best you keep off the subject to him."

She agreed to this and no more was said about it when we went indoors again. I saw, too, that the lad revealed nothing to ruffle Mr. Appleby, and when the lovers had taken their tea and driven off together, he praised Mr. Mayburn and thought he was a clever gentleman and a good listener. He went further and declared that he had more faith than was common in young men.

"He's been well brought up," said the old chap; "he's got religion. And, in his fantastic calling, no doubt religion is very needful.

"I always hoped," he went on, "she might take a husband to draw her away from the public eye; but now, though regretting her trade, seeing that she is going to persist in it, I'm glad her partner belongs to the same job and will be able to keep guard over her."

Which left me contented that all would be well; but a few weeks later I got a letter from Janice where you might say how a cloud was already rising from the blue. But I marked the nature of the hitch and hoped it would soon come loose again. Here were two bright young creatures who had built up a dream of their united lives working together in the trade they had chosen; but now they found themselves suddenly faced with problems greater than art that didn't look past solving in my opinion, but evidently tended that way.

"It is a funny thing, Mother," wrote Janice, "that my beloved Morris dislikes the Church of England far more than I dislike the Church of Rome! It is in his blood I suppose, but you would not have expected it from him. If I had been a Buddhist, or some other religion altogether, which he thought was all wrong, I could have understood it, but, though we think alike about all that matters and believe in the same eternal truths, yet sometimes he seems to feel there are barriers still that must be broken down, if we are to be happy, and can only be broken down when I join his Church. I put my foot in it rather badly not long ago and annoyed him. Actually annoyed the precious man, though half joking when I did so! I asked what he would say if I suggested that he should come into my Church instead of agreeing to join his. Then quite a fierce light came into his beautiful eyes and he made some very unkind remarks about the Church of England and even suggested it wasn't a Church at all, but a schism!"

So Janice wrote and, when I replied in the weekly letter I always sent her, I took no notice, reckoning silence was the best answer that I could make. She still felt that to be in his fold wouldn't strain her opinions, though he had made it clear her fold was shaky—if not worse; but for the rest I only felt sorry to hear he could let himself cast any disrespect on the Protestants, who had done quite as well for righteousness as his persuasion. I felt sad for them both, but as yet no fear that their love and devotion would not be equal to triumphing over the hitch, and I guessed, when the girl had joined up with the Romans, the matter would cease to trouble either of them. But one thing I knew, and that was how Janice wouldn't go back upon her principles any more than her young man was likely to do. She had always shown a very good appetite for worship and liked church-going from childhood. In fact to try and be a good Christian was all that ever mattered to her, and she had got that from me because, I'd always felt as comfortable with one body of faithful folk as another. Better to think everybody may be right, than nobody but yourself can be.

I had almost forgotten Janice's vexations and fell busy with my poultry and another Christmas in sight, when the girl wrote that she

was flying down home again, and I rejoiced to hear she meant stopping quite a time. I didn't link the visit with trouble for a moment, until she showed up, looking lovely as moonrise in a silver-fox coat, but terribly unhappy. She told me the whole parlous tale after we were alone together that night, and nothing ever I heard puzzled me worse.

CHAPTER IV

EVEN old Matthew could see that Janice was not herself when she arrived, but hoped she had come home to eat pounds of Devonshire cream and breathe fresh air; for he always said there lacked enough air in London to go round and feed all the millions of lungs herded up there. Not until he had gone to bed did she start on her tale—fantastic to me, yet more tragical than all her play-acting for the poor maid herself. I asked after Mr. Mayburn to give her an opening.

"Now tell me about your Morris," I began, and she unfolded all she had been through.

"You must listen patiently," she answered. "I'll try at least to make you understand what I understand myself. Morris is logical. There are three things in his life, just as there are three things in mine; but we don't put them in the same order and that has made a dreadful situation. The three things are art, religion and our love for each other, and Morris puts religion first, art second, love for me third; while I put him first and feel my art and my religion are halves of the same whole and mean really one thing."

Of course I was plunged in deep water at once and had naught to say so far.

"The truth of it is," she went on, "that Morris is far more interested in his soul than his body."

"Like Mr. Appleby," I said.

"Yes."

"An amazing thing at his age and loving you as he does," I suggested.

"It's all amazing to me. Amazing things have appeared in his way of looking at life that I never thought were there. I have heard other actors say he is a fanatic."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Somebody overwhelmed with a great cause and prepared to give his life for it," she explained. "Somebody who feels that nothing else can compare in importance with that cause."

"Well, there you are," I said. "Surely love for you is the lynch-pin of his life and may it long continue to be."

"That's how I felt to him," answered Janice, "but now, since I have seen what his great cause is, I only wonder how he ever found time to look at me twice. He seemed such a perfect lover and I thought art and religion would be a steadfast background to our united lives. But now all that has crashed, Mother, because not only does he care far more for his own soul than his body, but more for my soul than my body!"

"Lord, Janice!" I exclaimed, "who ever heard of any young man being took like that?"

"In his art," she continued, "he likes to play characters triumphing over the world and battling against fate and suffering torments of mind and body. And now he's worked martyrdom into his real life until I almost think he enjoys it!"

"What the mischief has he got to martyr himself about—a young man born with a silver spoon in his mouth—money, brains, good looks and the love of a girl like you?" I asked.

"It's what he was born with in his heart," she said. "It's something in his character—something handed down in his blood that grows on him and makes his conscience turn him against everything."

"Not against you?"

"In a way, yes."

"He ought to see a doctor about it," I suggested.

"No, no—listen, Mother. That's the background and I'm only telling you to explain what's happened. I never questioned the strange thoughts that flit through his brain until a thing suddenly appeared between us that made him change to me. I felt our love must be eternal and couldn't imagine it lay in our power to stop it."

"What the mischief bitched it up then?" I asked.

"A pitiful thing. A thing you might say too small to have had such a result; yet the moment it happened, it grew to its true, horrible size."

"If you made a mistake why didn't you call it back, my love?"

"Impossible, because I couldn't. I never shared the passionate feelings Morris had about religion and I felt happy enough as you know to join his Church, if only for the joy of feeling we should always be one in it; but I found you can't join the Roman faith, like you join a company of kindred spirits and take your own way where your conscience points. I was well content to enter and be a faithful member, but then came the fearful discovery and I found something that mattered to me as much as it mattered to them, and there was no escape."

"What could a girl like you know, or feel, that hadn't long ago been settled and ordained once for all by Mr. Mayburn's Church?" I asked.

"The very question Morris asked me. And nobody was more surprised than I was to find where my conscience landed me."

"Then drat your conscience," I cried, "if it's come between you and all your hopes of leading a happy married life."

I oughtn't to have said a wild thing like that; but Janice agreed with me notwithstanding.

"No doubt many defy conscience when it seems to oppose their dearest hopes," she said. "I might even have done that; but there were two things against doing it. And the first was I knew Morris would never forgive me if I did defy conscience; and the second was that every instinct in my heart and soul made me feel I could not."

"Not even if marriage turned on it?"

"Not even then. There are some things that you are built to hate the very idea of doing, even though they may raise no actual question of right or wrong. And this was one of them—a deed that millions of Christians accept as a matter of course and millions of other Christians do not."

"Well, if it's only a matter of taste, where's the trouble?" I asked her. "If he likes it and you don't, why not leave it at that, Janice?"

"That's what I fondly thought would happen," she told me. "It seemed common sense. But it turns out to be vital, Mother."

I know, of course, there were points where folk don't see alike and which account for all the different ways of being a Christian, but couldn't think upon one to part a pair of proper lovers.

"What the mischief can over-top your affection for each other?" I begged to know.

"Nothing could do that," she answered, "and it seemed a little thing anyway, yet it soon turned out to be a terrible big thing. I knew Morris did what is called go to confession. Lots of people do and gain any amount of comfort and support from it. And, knowing it was optional in the Church of England, I took for granted it was the same in his Church. And that was the first shock I gave him when I told him I couldn't do that. 'I know it comforts you, Morris,' I said, 'but it would be impossible for me. The idea of telling my sins to a man instead of to God makes me shiver even to think of, and the idea of a man absolving my sins makes me shiver too.' Morris stared at me and told me how my words had shocked him and how he hoped and prayed I would see how wrong they were. He poured out a flood of reasons why I should think differently about what was to him a most precious support and a tower of strength; but

I could only say I didn't see any chance of changing though perhaps, in future time, when I had become a Roman Catholic, I might find my feelings change. But he said the question couldn't be put off and, upon the answer, would depend whether I could become a Roman Catholic at all. He didn't know if permission would be granted for me to call myself one without going to confession and rather feared it wouldn't. But he was sorrowful to find he couldn't convince me at once. 'You appear to overlook the profound significance of Holy orders,' he said. 'We confess to a fellow-man, but that man is a priest—the minister of the divine blessing of absolution and the mouthpiece of the Holy Ghost.' So that's how it was left for a little while—till three days ago in fact. Then he had learned all he wanted to know and came to me under the impression he had solved the problem and all was going to be well."

"Thank God I'm sure, my love," I said, "and seeing what a ticklish subject religion may turn to, I do hope you'll both go carefully in future."

"It wasn't so," she answered. "It looked all right to start with, but not when he went into it. One thing depends upon another and there are wheels within wheels you see. Morris found that, as a general principle, confession could be dispensed with though a great spiritual loss; but there comes a time every year when everything depends upon it and all true believers must make their confession. A Roman Catholic must take Easter communion on Easter Day and must previously go to confession and receive absolution. Which means that confession is compulsory, doesn't it?"

"Tom and I always went to the Lord's Supper twice a year," I told her: "at Christmas and Easter; and you came likewise, my love, after you were confirmed. And where do you find yourselves to be standing now, Janice?"

"I suggested that it would be far better if I stuck to the Church of England, because why should this part us?"

"To agree to differ never weakened true love," I said.

"So I thought; but I thought wrong," explained Janice, "for, after we had reached that point, I received a fearful shock, Mother, and found Morris couldn't even endure that now. I thought a compromise was the only alternative, as it so often is; but he had now reached a position where he could see no chance to compromise, and hearing I couldn't confess my sins and lay my heart bare to another human being, proved too much for him. You see in Rome's eyes we are doubtfully Christians at best and this unhappy thing is the last straw for Morris."

I had never before heard of a religion so strong as to break a man's troth to a woman; but there it was.

"He's made such a tight-rope of his faith," I said, "that he's got no eyes left for you. Yet he found time to fall in love with you and make you love him, my lamb. You want to tell me it's broken off, yet can't bring yourself to say the sorrowful words."

She nodded and put her finger-cold hands between mine.

"It's true, though somehow I haven't quite reached the stage of believing it can be. God knows why I didn't yield, yet for all my love, I couldn't yield. Not bravery that kept me from yielding; but fright."

All double Dutch to me of course—the workings of their poor minds.

"It was fright when I thought of the future, Mother, and wondered how I would fare with a saint like Morris, and how his children would fare with him if we ever had any," she went on. "I'd have surrendered I think, but he'd cast me into such a whirlpool when he said he hated compromise and that hell was paved with compromises and so on, that I began to fear—to fear him of all people on earth!"

"You can't love and fear in the same quarter no doubt," I granted.

"If my small mind was in such a state, you can guess what a storm overtook his big mind," continued the girl. "He was tender but bitter clear and he had thought of the future too. He said that love was no more than a shadow against faith. 'Faith holds Destiny,' he said, 'and, if we had children, born of love rather than faith, we should be endangering their destiny and committing sin.' He'd reached now to a dreadful doubt about me myself, and I'm afraid he began to think of me as something that had actually come between him and his own destiny. You could see in his face he was suffering fearfully about it. Anyway he bade me an eternal farewell, and it would not surprise me if he gave art an eternal farewell, too, before long. Love and art were both sacred things as well as religion when first he fell in love; but now love's gone and art's going—or so he told me."

"A hard religion—to warn you off the best happiness life can offer you, which is love," I said.

"The best it could offer me—not him," she answered. "He's a great man—too great for any woman. He taught me what love was, and that will make me a better actress anyway. Art is what I came into the world for I suppose—not love."

The girl wasn't going to let her cruel situation make her give up her play-acting and I felt glad of that. I didn't say a word against the young man, but I did feel indignant, he had acted contrary to

Nature and brought grief to a girl in a thousand. Yet, since his religion took such a tyrant shape, I felt glad he had turned down my foster-child before it was too late. They were both young, and, so long as you're young, hope beckons out of the future. Lovers' quarrels play all manner of antics and I couldn't but feel two clever people with such devotion as this pair might yet find a way to satisfy their consciences. But when I said as much to Janice, she shook her head.

"It isn't a lovers' quarrel," she explained. "It goes to the root of things. On the face of it the break looks absurd, but no difference that involves principle can be absurd. I will not confess my sins to anybody but God, and so I cannot join his Church; and if I cannot join his Church, then his conscience has warned him that he should not marry me. We have got to accept it, Mother."

Janice went back to London a week later. She asked me not to talk about it any more, but she found it impossible to explain the situation to Mr. Appleby and evaded doing so, leaving me to tell him after she had gone. Which I did and found he took her side, turned against poor Mr. Mayburn very furious and said he had parted those whom God had ordained to join together. A week or two passed and then my girl wrote her final words on the subject and told me what young Mr. Mayburn had done about his dreadful misfortune. He had scrapped his art along with his love and was going to become a priest.

I had told my old friend, Simon Townley, about the tragedy, for he was always one of Janice's great supporters and very fond of the child. He didn't work so hard as he used to work and was breaking in a young lawyer at Kingsbridge to follow him when he dropped the law.

I related the sad story.

"It's all over: they have parted, Mr. Townley," I told him. "He's played for safety you may say and going to put a brick wall between himself and a wife and family. The high-minded young fellow has thrown up Janice and play-acting also and ordains to be a clergyman. So a happy man is going to turn himself into a miserable minister and I ache a bit to think of it."

"So do I, Pete," he answered. "One of those hard cases that transcend reason, just as religion itself transcends reason and offers better bread than is made of wheat for those who can digest it. And some can, my dear. Nature must often be confounded to find her self-conscious creatures oppose her and bar her routine. But religion has frustrated Nature's plans again and again, and never more so than when it elevated love into a sacrament."

The old lawyer was in one of his moods when he talked beyond my understanding.

"Young Mayburn," he said, "has made his choice. Henceforth he will be called 'Father' by all who care to do so. He will be a Holy Father instead of a human father. Had Janice yielded her point, no doubt the man would have felt satisfied to assume a husband's role; but finding she could not, the discovery changed all his values, and turned him to the strong inclinations he had inherited."

"Very much to the credit of both of them," I said, "but far more of a facer for my girl than him."

"It looks like that now," he admitted, "yet who knows? Who can tell what young Morris Mayburn went through, or what he was called to suffer before he turned his back on his love and his art? Who shall say whether this earthquake in their lives will make or mar either of them? His choice may lead to a high place in his adopted calling; while Janice may, in time to come, love again and find art not all sufficing after all. It is impossible to prophesy about the young, or calculate their resiliency. Meantime I feel heartily sorry for Nature, who must little like to see such excellent material wasted."

But comforting as I always found Mr. Townley, I more admired Micah Widecombe's views of the whole sad business.

"Looks to be a case of his immortal soul first and the rest, nowhere," said the blacksmith. "No doubt a man must put his God before his intended, Pete, speaking generally; but if all's well with your future wife and you love her with your heart and soul, then surely you ought to look upon her as God's greatest gift—to be wedded and worshipped with all your best endeavours. And this young chap did so regard Janice at first, no doubt; but when he found her conscience was going to be her own affair, not his, then he changed his mind and came to the fearful thought she was no blessing at all but a danger. So he parted from her."

"I only pray your faith in God won't shatter your love of me, my dear," I said, bringing the subject to ourselves.

We had drifted into a great admiration for each other by now and his opinions of me, always uttered freely, were very comforting.

Then winter brought another fearful infliction, not only upon Beesworthy, but the nation, for a deadly influenza got England in its clutches and cut the thread of thousands who expected no such thing. I was anxious but not frightened for old Matthew from the first because, though the middle sixties are a dangerous time in a man's life and the number that drop out at that period can hardly be counted, I knew him well through his most perilous years and counted on him to endure. However he caught the influenza, which was no

respecter of age and overthrew children and folk in their prime and the ancient all alike. The young mostly got through, but the old were smitten hip and thigh and very few round about eighty weathered the storm. Dear old Doctor Meadows came out of his shell under the stress and, brave as a lion, strove to help Doctor Tanner, who was run off his legs when the plague rose to its full height. Old Matt did what he was told and drank what was compounded for him and I nursed him as faithful and tended him as close as if he had been my own father. In a battle like that you forget everything else until it's won or lost, and neither Micah nor myself wasted a thought on our own affairs while we toiled at Mr. Appleby. For I did the nursing and watched over him by night and Widecombe would come in by day, after his work was done, and cheer him up and read the paper to him sometimes and bring any news that might be stirring, except to name those who had died. Matthew talked little and we knew such thoughts as he could collect about him, when he wasn't coughing his soul out of his body, were all centred on the hereafter. And then, just as the good news came from Meadows that he had passed his climax and was going to live, I went down myself, and three days later Micah was in for it also. More than half the year had passed during which my future husband and I were going to keep our secret and the time would soon come when we ordained to make our purpose known, but now a most curious trick of chance overtook all of us and, though we had laboured to save the good old man, by falling sick ourselves we did just the fatal thing and finished him off. Another of those cases when Providence takes the bit in her teeth and wins out. When on his legs again and making a good recovery, yet still in a very tender condition, old Matt started to repay all we had done him in like case. He ran about to minister to me and he went out-of-doors to tend Micah; and that was the end of him, for on a nasty day, with the wind in the east and bitter cold, his weakened frame was gone in four days with a pneumonia. He went just after Micah and I had weathered the worst. I was at his bedside at the time, though Micah could not be. And the reverend Tozer called an hour before he died and cheered his going. No man worked harder through the epidemic than Mr. Tozer and few clergymen read the funeral service oftener. Doctor Meadows wouldn't suffer Micah or me to attend the funeral, but Linda Gollop went at my wish and told me about it.

After we met again, Micah joined me in my mourning.

"Dear old Matt is with Tom now," I said, "and I hope, when it's our turn, our coming won't cloud their eternal happiness, or anything like that."

"No," declared the smith. "No need to fear such a mishap, Pete. All will be made clear to both of them—most like before we are called. And may the time be far distant in any case."

In fact my future husband allowed himself a good bit of impatience now and was anxious for our intentions to be fulfilled without any more delay.

One other fell under the influenza just at the finish. It didn't miss Birch Hanger by any means and my family, including Aaron himself and Phyllis, had a nasty bout of it, but Grace Blanchard escaped and her sons, Norton and Barnaby, escaped and none looked to be worse a month afterward, except Aaron. He was getting well into the dangerous sixties now and he gave up tobacco and never smoked again after his influenza.

The last one that succumbed, after you might say all danger had passed, was Linda's brother, David. After Mildred's death, David came to live with Linda and save money by doing so. He considered it her duty to support him in all things and leave him free to devote his time and energies to the Salvation Army.

"He was a reformed character, as all the world knows," said Linda to me a month after the funeral, "but he suffered from his sad habits till the end, though he didn't know a thing about them himself. Just those misfortunes that folk never know themselves, but everybody else does only too well."

"You'll miss him however," I told her.

"I won't pretend I shall miss him except to my advantage," she confessed. "He was a strain upon my small money and what, if anything, he received from the Salvationists, he never told me; but he took quite a lot of mine."

"Those unworldly people often look to us commonplace ones for their expenses," I explained, "and don't feel no more obliged than the prophet was to the ravens that kept him going."

"And another thing, Pete: I'm returning to the Church of England again now," she told me. "I'm too old for such a lot of out-of-door worship as the Army's addicted to and I want to feel the church roof over me when I pray. How should I set about being received back into the Church? Ought I to let Mr. Tozer know?"

But I advised against any stir in the matter.

"No call to make a song about it, Linda, if you ask me," I said. "No doubt his reverence will be very pleased to see you. Come with me next Sunday."

Meantime Micah and I let it be known we were going to wed. We fixed upon Easter for it and had our banns called. Dear old Matt had left me all he'd got and, as the house was better

and more commodious than Widecombe's, he agreed to make his home with me, which lengthened his journey to the forge by fifty yards at most.

We had a very quiet wedding with only Linda Gollop and my family in attendance, because we kept the date as secret as possible; and, then again, Micah showed his nice feelings as to where we should launch our honeymoon and absent ourselves for a few days from home according to custom. I was afraid of my life he might choose Plymouth, for he would often talk of looking up Jane again, and he liked Plymouth for the reason that he was born there; but no—he remembered as well as I did that my first honeymoon was spent in that city and felt far too delicate to venture on what was holy ground to me. So, when the subject came up, as I knew it must, he proposed going inland.

"We'll give the sea a miss for a fortnight," he said, "and though neither you nor me could live away from it in comfort, we'll distract ourselves at Bath, or in the Midlands. Unless you would fancy London."

"I knew he hated London and had seen the place but once and little liked it, so I told him Bath would be just one of the happy thoughts in which he abounded.

"I much dreaded you might fancy Plymouth, my dear," I said, "but no doubt you understood."

"Certainly I did," he replied. "No man would choose for his wife to be haunted with her first at the moment she'd taken her second."

We found Bath to be most interesting and full of fine buildings though somewhat wanting in air after Beesworthy; but we took a number of charabanc trips. There was a big iron foundry there that greatly interested Micah and, being a good one for writing to my friends, I sent off a number of letters and laughed and laughed, because I kept signing them "Pete Appleby" and forgot I was called "Widecombe" now. We had our quarters at a commercial hotel, where the letter paper was gratis. I received some kindly gifts on my marriage and this was a good time to write my thanks; but perhaps the present most valued came from Luke and Dolly Caunter, now happily settled down at Birch Hanger and well thought upon. They sent me a great cloam jug with a white rose painted on the side of it, well suited for carrying a bunch of flowers and likely to have cost them ten shillings if not more. And Linda gave me a hat, with a blue ostrich feather on it, that had belonged to Milly and never worn since her sister died, because too big for her. Just one of her kindly thoughts; but Micah hated the hat. Still now and again, when he was out of the way, I would wear it for Linda to see.

CHAPTER V

We entered into our married life without hoping too much, or fearing too much. Micah felt a bit nervous at first, but soon threw off his suspicions. Each day proved as peaceful as the last and offered no sign that he might have made another mistake. He was a great one for monotony and never so contented as when nothing happened. Of course something must always be happening to somebody, but, as long as it didn't happen to us, he kept a brave heart. Beesworthy didn't stand still more than any other place and the inhabitants were called to endure their ups and downs, but we jogged on well into middle age without any outstanding event, content and happy as need be, which my husband was grateful to note being a man with unusual powers of gratitude. Experience renewed his respect for the married state, which he had entirely lost after Jane ran away, and he said that there was nothing like the right wife to come between a man and turmoil of any kind. But, looking back over that perfection, I grant that, for anybody disposed to relate their adventures, perfect peace offers you small material to interest your neighbours and now, retracing the first years with Micah, though full of beauty and comfort for us, they were much too happy to interest anybody else.

You may say that Janice represented our only real excitement, because Micah, knowing what she meant to me, had thrown himself into the dear girl's career, though nobody on earth knew less about art of any sort than he did. He thought, when young Mayburn entered his Church, that my foster-child would perhaps imitate him to the best of her power and take the veil and go into a nunnery, and Grace and Phyllis also fancied her mind might run that way; but I never feared it and should not have favoured it, and I much doubt if such a notion ever entered Janice's head. She was now what you may call a professional actress and engaged with a company under a great actor, who presented the plays of Shakespeare, which Janice held to be the best in the world. The company travelled round the big towns and it was at the end of one of these tours, when she had gone all over England and felt properly tired out after presenting numberless heroines, mostly in distress, that she came down to us for a rest and I felt it a great homecoming and an addition to my life, because I had not seen her for more than six months. She couldn't attend my wedding, because she was acting in Edinburgh at the time, but she had sent me a chiming "grandfather" clock for her present, with a note like Big Ben to tell the hours—a most lovely

affair that Micah never tired of listening to and said must have cost fifty pounds, if a shilling. It was already famous in Beesworthy and folk would often look in round about noon, just for the pleasure of hearing the wondrous bell.

Janice was very glad to settle down in obscurity along with me and visit old haunts and her old friends and help me with my birds and daily chores. She arrived tired and drawn a bit to my eye, but she grew younger again in her native air and her appetite bettered, and though a far-away sort of melancholy hovered over her, like a sea mist, she'd throw it off and be bright and full of the wonders of her profession. She said that theatres were a part of education and helped every-day people to enlarge their minds and their sympathy for their fellow-creatures. And once, when she was acting the part of Ophelia at a sea-port town, a chap in the pit bawled at the gentleman performing Hamlet and said he'd come up on the stage and knock his block off if he didn't treat the girl better.

"A great triumph that was," so Janice assured us, "but it frightened my Hamlet to death and made him forget his lines. He wouldn't go back to his lodgings alone afterwards, for fear the man might be lying in wait for him."

"A mariner no doubt," said Micah. "They don't like to see a female in distress, and he forgot it was all make-believe."

We took a picnic or two while Janice stayed with us. There was a little cove between Beesworthy and Dartmouth that she much favoured and I packed a nice holiday lunch and we hired Tom's old fishing-boat, still sound, and run now by one of our in-shore fishermen. *I'd sold it to him when Tom was lost—an old boat now* but called *Petronella* yet, though the name had very nearly worn off her bows. Bob Mason, the owner, was always glad to pleasure me. So he took us to Sandy Cove, where the trees come down to the sea very nearly and the combe above never knows the touch of frost. You'll see fuchsias and myrtles and such-like foreign plants doing well and a great blue gum tree from Australia prospered there in those days. Micah came and took a Saturday morning off to do so. And my nephew, Norton Blanchard, joined us too. He was Grace Aaron's second son and destined to follow my brother at Birch Hanger, because Barnaby, their eldest, had gone into the postal service and lacked of any farming instincts. A beautiful hot day we had and pottered about and picked wild flowers and grasses, and, from her pleasure in such trifles, you might have thought Janice was a country woman tuned to picnics and such like simplicities. We ate our food where a fresh-water brook came down through the vale to the sea and then, as the talk flagged and my husband showed signs of

wanting a nap, Norton had a happy thought and asked Janice if she had ever heard the famous tale belonging to Bob Mason's family history, and by good chance she had not. But she was very fond of listening to a tale, especially if a true one and full of surprises, so she lighted a cigarette, which was a habit she had got now, and said she would like to hear it.

"If we don't have something to keep us awake, we shall all go to sleep after that gorgeous luncheon," said Janice.

"It is a tale that kept a good many people awake long ago," answered Bob Mason. He was fond of telling it and told it very well and I knew it by heart long ago so I promised Janice she would find it good to hear.

"My own grandfather told me about Ann Bassett, who was his own mother," began Bob. "He declared she was the ugliest woman ever he had seen and grew into a proper gargoyle before she died. And yet two men were wishful to marry her, much to her surprise she used to say, because, owing to her appearance, she had long said good-bye to the hope of a husband. To find there was a man in the world who wanted her upset Ann's mind without a doubt and otherwise her adventures wouldn't have overtook her. She was an orphan and lived and kept house for her uncle, Nathan Bassett, at the village of Dittisham on the Dart river. A widower he was and a very snug and prosperous man well known for his uprightness and steadfast behaviour more than a century ago now and before Queen Victoria came to the throne. Old Bassett kept the 'Ferry' public-house at Dittisham and owned land and a valuable plum orchard and a good few high class horses, for he was a skilled horse-dealer among his other gifts and his steeds always fetched good money. In fact one way and another he was reckoned to be worth thousands of pounds and, being very attached to Ann, who ran his house and kept his books and saved him anxiety by her cleverness and loyal dealing, he had made her to be his heiress, which everybody well knew. Yet, with her terrible homely countenance and poor figure and guinea-fowl voice, none as yet had risen to the bait until there came a little, well-mannered man round about her own age, which was thirty-five. He suddenly appeared at Dittisham and rented a bedroom and sitting-room at the 'Ferry,' and after he'd been in residence a month, offered for Ann. She was so startled and thrown out of her steady stride by his attachment that she fell into most violent love for him—just because he could love her and for no other reason. She clung to the thought that his devotion was pure and she had drawn a respectable male to herself at last."

"The love that casts out all fear," said Janice, who was giving full attention to the tale.

Bob laughed.

"The sort of love that casts out a lot of things besides fear," he said, "common sense among 'em."

Then he went on.

"Blackstock, the man's name was—a quiet, nicely behaved chap well liked by the people at Dittisham, because he showed friendship and stood drinks and went to church of a Sunday and put his sixpence in the dish with the best and minded his own business. What that was none knew, but it took him to Dartmouth most days and he saw a good deal of the folk there and went aboard the little vessels that traded to France and the Channel Islands. He was a merry man full of amusing stories and always punctual with his rent, and he got to know Nathan Bassett and his niece well and there was talk of his buying a pair of horses some day, for he said he liked Devonshire and might ere long settle down round about somewhere. Nathan was used to visit his brother at Totnes for pheasant shooting once a year, come October, and he happened to be away for a week as usual, when Mr. Blackstock offered to wed Ann and she accepted him. So that was the news that awaited the inn-keeper when he came home again. And then Nathan changed his mind about Blackstock inside five minutes and, from thinking well of him, took quite another line and went so far as to call him a rogue and order him out of his house for evermore. And he spoke very clearly to Ann and didn't mince his words when she showed fight.

" 'I shan't say all I may think about this caper,' he told his niece, 'because to tell truth is to risk libel and never shall it be said I libelled any man. But the fearful news that he has offered to marry you and the still more fearful news that you took him, tells me two things I little like to hear. First that he's not the gentleman of private means I thought he was and second that you are not the clear-eyed, sensible woman I always believed you to be. Therefore I hope you'll put an end to this nonsense at the earliest possible moment and let him understand you have changed your mind and got back your senses.' "

" 'Never, so help me God!' answered the woman.

" 'You're of age and I cannot appeal to your reason if you lack it,' replied her uncle, 'but should you dare to marry Felix Blackstock, Ann, then I shall send for my lawyer and write a new will, because that man never handles a crown of mine I can assure you.' "

"Nothing new so far, Janice," I told her. "That sort of thing has happened scores of times, but the wonders come after."

"A splendid beginning anyway," she answered. "Go on, Bob."

"Ann stormed and Nathan held his ground," continued Mason. "She told Blackstock of her uncle's words and assured him they didn't trouble her for a moment. 'What's his money to me against your love, Felix?' she said. 'Let him go and his land and his horses with him. I've won you and you took me for myself, not my prospects, and I'd far sooner sacrifice the shoes off my feet than the man I love.' He applauded this fine outburst and didn't bate an eyelash. 'Money is trash compared with you,' he told her, 'but I am a man of peace and we must have no bitterness. I shall bow to Mr. Bassett's ruling and leave Dittisham; but I shall go no farther than Dartmouth. There we can meet without vexing your uncle and mature our plans. It looks like a runaway match, darling, if you are brave enough to face it.' She said she'd run to Jericho when he willed and talked very unkindly about Mr. Bassett no doubt; but Blackstock went his way and made no fuss. He just faded out and settled in Dartmouth, while Nathan, once he was gone, calmed down and doubted not that Ann would soon forget him and come to her senses."

"Not knowing what Ann's love amounted to, or what Blackstock's craft amounted to I expect," said Janice.

"Exactly so," agreed Bob. "Those three people were in for a good deal of astonishment after the next Christmas."

Then he lighted his pipe again and went on.

"'Downey' was the proper name for Master Felix without a doubt and he planned a very skilled and brilliant scheme of action which promised to be the masterpiece of his crooked career, and didn't look to have a flaw in it from his point of view. He told Ann that it must be a runaway match and assured her how, once the deed was done, her uncle would come round and forgive them when he found all went well. He was a first-rate judge of character, as rogues, they say, are apt to be, and if he had found Nathan Bassett a different type, he might have driven a different bargain and put plenty of money into the inn-keeper's pocket; but his visit to the 'Ferry' had showed him what the old publican was and, when he discovered there was nothing doing with Nathan, he changed his plans and went for Ann.

"'Love makes everything easy,' he said to her, 'and, what would have been difficult without your help, will be child's play with you on my side. I leave Dartmouth in a fortnight's time and have fixed the date when your uncle will be away from home again as you told me. I have now at Dartmouth a good deal of valuable property which I must convey to my customers at Plymouth, but I can kill two birds with one stone and carry away, not only my property but my priceless girl. Had Mr. Bassett been a different fashion of man, I should have become a good nephew to him and helped him to add

to his savings; but since he has wronged me and threatened to rob you of your inheritance, we must go our way without him.' 'I never want to see his face again,' answered Ann, 'and where you go, there will I go with you.' Then he told her that when her uncle had cleared off for a week to one of his sporting friends, the following must be the plan of action. 'We'll fly by night,' he said, 'and help ourselves to your big, closed coach and a pair of your uncle's fine hosses for our journey. Only borrow them, you understand, for I'm not the man to take a straw that don't belong to me, let alone a coach and hosses; but we'll borrow them to carry us so far as Plymouth, and there in due time he'll hear they are safely housed and waiting for him when he's pleased to send for them.' 'I care not a button for him and his hosses,' she replied to Felix, 'and if they can serve your turn, so much the better,' And then he told her what was to be her part of the plot. 'You'll find more than yourself to fill that big coach,' he said, 'for I shall bring my cargo up from Dartmouth by water on the night in a couple of row-boats, and I want to find you waiting at the ferry with the coach. Then we'll load up and away by Willow Ford to Totnes and so reach the Plymouth road.' It was for that purpose I came to Dittisham, to find a sensible man and a good conveyance, but alas! failed to find the sensible man. Instead I found a noble, loving woman, who is going to be my very own in a few weeks.'

"It was all as straightforward and simple as that, and Ann—handy with horses as an ostler—played her part very clever. So there came a rough, black night in February when she went to the stables all ready for her flitting, harnessed a couple of powerful steeds to the coach, looked to the candles in their sockets to port and starboard of the great vehicle and had it down to the ferry landing at two o'clock as ordered. Ten minutes after she took her tryst there came the sound of cars and two row-boats slipped up the river from Dartmouth, with Felix Blackstock in the first of them. There had been some tremendous heavy rain of late and she warned him. 'The floods are out,' she said, 'and I'll be glad to get over Willow Ford so soon and so safe as we can. After that it ain't so much a matter of miles, but of hills to Totnes and Plymouth road. It's up and down and some sharp turns and rough bottoms and inky black.' He laughed. 'You shall drive us and our fortunes,' he said. 'With you at the helm all's well.' Then he had his goods unshipped and packed into the coach—a lot of stuff but quickly handled by half a dozen sailor men—and in fifteen minutes from their landing the cargo was all safely stowed and the boats off down stream again. The pair started then, walked the horses quietly through sleeping Dittisham and broke into

a good trot when they were clear. And Ann felt Providence to be on her side and had the time of her life snuggled up to her sweetheart and all the world before her. But Blackstock knew to a yard where they were going to part for evermore, and that was at the turn-pike gate a mile further on and three miles from Willow Ford. He'd mapped out the night's work in every detail. He drove, despite his promise that she should, and knowing him to be very skilled at driving and riding both, she felt no fear he was going to take risks with her; but at the turnpike he bade her alight and open the gate. 'We needn't to call up the keeper,' he said. 'He'll be asleep and won't know there's been anybody through on a night like this.' So down she jumped and opened the gate, and in ten seconds Felix was through and whipped up his horses and thundered off into the darkness. 'Good-bye, Ann!' he bawled from the box-seat, 'and here's your luggage and something to remember me by!' She heard objects drop at her feet as he spoke, then he was gone and she stood like a stone till the tramp of the galloping horses faded out on the wind."

Bob Mason made a pause here, but of course that wasn't all the tale.

"What you might call the end of Act One, Janice," I said.

"A good curtain, but I felt sure there was another act to come," she declared.

"Certainly," agreed Bob, "and that's the cream of the tale. Most maidens might have felt pretty well down and out in that fix, because Ann found herself miles from anywhere at two o'clock in the morn, with the rain pouring and every mortal thing against her. Besides, even if she could reach somewhere to get in touch with friends and the law, there were no telephones, or telegraphs, or police stations, or any civilised contrivances to save the situation for her in those days. And yet, such was her cleverness and her quickness of action and her rage against him that she did save it. But when I ask at this point what enters into the minds of the listeners for her to do, not one ever can say."

We waited then to see if Janice could suggest the line of action, but of course she could not. And more could anybody else, for the reason that a thing known to Ann Bassett in her hour of defeat couldn't possibly be known to anybody hearing the tale more than a hundred years afterwards.

"No doubt, though hit so hard, her wrath had a healthy effect on her brains," continued Bob. "Rage don't always produce useful action in man or woman under the influence, but her indignation made her wits work to good purpose. It might be too late, but one thing looked to be worth trying and in half a minute she was on her

way to try it. She knew every turn and twist of the country and every field track round about, and now she lifted her eyes to the hills and ran—swifter than ever she had run before—up a wide-mouth goyle that opened half a mile above where stood Willow Mill. From here the mill-leat overflowed to the valley three miles further on and joined a bigger stream above Willow Ford and, with her only thought at the moment to be revenged on Blackstock, her idea was to open the mill dam, let out the leat and so bring down a proper volume of water that would block him at the ford once for all. If she could do that, she reckoned he would be cut off on the wrong side, with no chance to get to Totnes and safety. By that time she could have roused the people at the pike and got law working. As she said, long afterwards, her one hope in life was to get the man taken and tried and sent to Botany Bay if not farther. That was her answer—to let loose a force that would go faster than any galloping horses, once it was started; and hate winged her steps, for she believed the road, once blocked, would mean Blackstock's destruction. Flood water was already running over the mill stream's sluices when she got there, but she knew what to do and turned a handle to open the sluice-gate and in two minutes the stream finished the job. The old timbers gave way and a tremendous flood roared down into the valley and shouted like thunder in the night. She stood dazed and deafened for a minute to see what she had done, because it seemed as if the side of the hill was being torn out and the cataract looked like to shake the mill foundations and bring down the wheel. She saw lights in the windows and heard men shouting. Then she made a bolt back, not wishing for any complications as to her night's work. She must have been pretty well beat by this time, but her mind worked and she looked ahead. Whatever might hap to her faithless sweetheart, Ann had to consider what was going to hap to her, so she resolved to keep out of the picture altogether and hide up her revenge against the time her uncle would demand to hear of his coach and horses. She remembered how Blackstock had pitched down her little travelling bag before he bolted and knew the spot at the pike gate where he did so and her first care was to return to that. There lay her bag and something else—a small parcel beside it. She thrust this into the bag also and then trudged back to Dittisham, got in the house same way as she had come out, made good the fastenings and went to bed thanking God no doubt how not a thing was yet known about what had happened at the 'Ferry' that night.

"Early next morning a maiden woke her with the news from outside that there had been a parlous robbery and the big coach and a pair of horses stolen, and, when she came down, the outside men

were in a fearful upstore and one of them had already saddled up and galloped to Dartmouth. The doings got over the country-side quick enough and before noon there came an ugly tale from Willow Ford. It told of the fierce torrent and the havoc it had done and the savage end of Nathan Bassett's horses and the rescue of the treasure his coach contained. And Ann put two and two together, but it wasn't until three days later that they made four for her. Daylight showed the spate run down and the great coach stranded and water-logged in the midst of the ford. It was clear that Blackstock had been caught, like Pharaoh in the Red Sea, and overwhelmed half-way across. The horses couldn't break loose and were drowned; but of their driver there was no sign, and, since Ann kept her mouth shut very close, none could say who the criminals might be until later. Meantime the excise-men made their haul, for it was found that Bassett's coach contained contraband goods of every precious sort to the value of hundreds of pounds. Then Felix Blackstock himself turned up—in a fisherman's net. He'd been carried down by the stream and washed out where the lesser waters met Dart. So all shone out clear enough and the stranger proved a high-class smuggler, long wanted, who had lost his luck and his life at the most critical moment in his career.

"His methods were clear enough and the ferry landing showed how his booty had been brought to the coach, while none doubted that, with his knowledge of the inn, he had managed to break in and harness the hosses and make his get-away single handed. Ann kept her own counsel and nobody associated her with the job during her uncle's life. Before he died she had married Ernest Mason, Nathan's right-hand man and a very trustworthy fellow, and when her uncle was gone and his property hers, she told Mason the truth and showed him what Felix had thrown down to her when he took his leave. It was a bit of Flemish lace counted to be worth at least five pounds. 'But I couldn't wear it while dear Uncle Nat was living, nor yet tell how I came by it,' she said. 'A fearful affair,' answered Ernest Mason, 'yet a long sight better for your own future happiness that you murdered Master Blackstock instead of married him.' 'So I've always felt myself,' she is reported to have replied. 'He was a nasty piece of work and better dead. I'd hoped to send him to Botany Bay if I was lucky, but where I did send him was worse yet.' My great grandmother she was and must be in Dittisham churchyard to this day, if one knew where to look for her."

Janice praised the tale and said that the woman's character was interesting.

"Some people might think Ann was rather a nasty piece of work herself," she said, "but she would make a splendid heroine for a play.

I'd like to act her and show her planning how she was going to try and get level with Felix, and how she felt about it when she found she'd killed him, and how she kept out of the mess herself, and if she ever felt a touch of remorse when she wore his Flemish lace."

"Made a very good wife by all accounts," Bob told us.

"I'm sure she did," agreed Janice. "She would probably have made a very good wife for Blackstock and forgiven him all his rascalities if he had only been true to her."

Then my nephew, Norton, spoke. He talked very little at any time, but had been thinking out the details in his slow, methodical fashion.

"I lay that if the smuggler got over that ford he wasn't bound for Plymouth," said Norton. "He told Ann 'Plymouth' to put her off the scent after he'd chucked her. He'd most likely have driven up to Exeter, or Bristol and her uncle would never have seen his coach and horses again."

"Who had all the treasure?" asked Janice.

"The State took everything," replied Bob. "In those days it was a battle royal between the Customs and the free-traders, as the smugglers called themselves, and when Blackstock went to Dittisham, no doubt he hoped to find Nathan Bassett on his side and ready to help him make his haul."

This talk of the old days had passed our time sitting on the beach at Sandy Cove and Janice called our attention to what story-telling can do when you are in the mood to listen.

"Other people's stories often help you so well to get on with your own," she said. "They bring a picture of things happening to your neighbours and take you out of yourself. That's one good reason for plays: to show you another life than your own and make you wiser and better able to judge of what your fellow-men and women face and suffer."

We received these fine ideas without any remarks, not being able to take them in very brightly; and then Micah woke up, for he had been asleep during the last half-hour, and we set about gathering some sticks to boil the kettle for tea. I look back at that holiday with a deal of pleasure because it did my blessed girl some good and lightened her spirits. She had all her money now she was of age and it had mounted up very usefully during the years; but she showed herself far too generous with it. When she came to Beesworthy, she always brought us presents that cost money and this time had fetched Micah a pair of outstanding fine tobacco-pipes in a case and two dazzling ties for Sunday wear, while me she brought a proper roll of rich black silk, because she knew my Sabbath silk was worn out.

She had a kind word for something very special my husband was doing just about then. Shoeing horses and mending agricultural implements continued to be the backbone of his labours, though he did not work as hard as of old, but he had skill high above these every-day tasks, and he now engaged to build a little gate of scrolled iron-work—a most graceful and delicate affair—that astonished both me and Micah himself as it developed in his hands. The vicarage garden communicated with the churchyard and vestry by a wooden gate which was all to pieces, so it had been Mr. Tozer's idea to set up a new iron gate worthy of such a position. In his natural modesty my husband doubted whether he might be equal to such a task, but he started and the thing soon turned into what Janice called 'a work of art.' She told him that some day, when she found a dwelling-house to suit her in time to come, not too far away from us, he should fashion a pair of scroll iron gates for her front entrance.

I didn't set over-much hope on her settling down and giving up work in our life-time, but I still trusted that she might out-live the sad memories of her first love and meet with a man she could partner. For, without that, she would go her way a lonely woman in the matter of motherhood, for which such a nature as hers was well fitted.

Janice never mentioned poor Morris Mayburn to me again and I never mentioned him. When she was not touring, she lived in a little flat in London and shared the same with a London actress who was her greatest friend in the theatre world and more talented than herself she always said. Her flat stood in the neighbourhood of Regent's Park and by night, so Janice told us, you could hear the wild beasts roaring sometimes from the Zoological Gardens. She was going for another acting tour next autumn and much hoped after that her director would arrange for her to join a London theatre and make an appearance in town. Five-and-twenty years old she was by now and in the cream of her loveliness.

Just after Micah's gate had been hung and won applause, my thoughts and the thoughts of his aunt Phyllis and his mother, Grace, became closely concentrated on Norton Blanchard, for he was courting, and though a very reserved man, and most secret about his own affairs, there looked to be no question about it. But Grace couldn't feel to favour the cause of his attraction and more could Phyllis, while his father didn't offer an opinion, because he said to do so would be waste of time. "If my son wishes to marry Nelly Trundle and she wills to marry him, it will happen," said Aaron.

The Trundles farmed "Owls' Roost" and had but two daughters and no sons. There was Nelly, their eldest, and Prudence, her sister, and Nelly marred her natural good looks by priding herself too much

upon them. She was handsome, but something vain of her sky-blue eyes and her lint-coloured hair and rose-bud skin. Gay and glad to be alive was she in those days, and very much gone on Norton Blanchard and hopeful that her affection was returned. They offered another example of the queer ways of human nature, because they couldn't be said to have much in common, Norton being a very silent man, a little awkward in company and not given to speech, while Nelly loved to be the centre of attraction and could chatter and amuse a gathering at any time. She had a lot of admirers beside Norton, but made no secret of her devotion to him and would generally be seen at his side when opportunity offered. Her sister, Prudence, helped her and made opportunities for the lovers to be together and their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Trundle, were all for it and reckoned nothing could promise greater happiness for Nelly than to be married to a man like Norton. In fact all that looked to be wanting centred on Norton, and Mrs. Trundle confessed to me, behind the scenes, that it was time and more than time he offered himself.

"Silence is golden as we all know, Pete," she told me, "but your nephew looks to be overdoing it. The hour has come for him to speak and it's getting very ill-convenient at 'Owl's Roost,' for Nelly's worried and daunted why he holds off, so, if you could whisper a word to him to get on with it, we should be very thankful to you."

But I didn't feel disposed to put a word in. Norton was very fond of me in his silent fashion and I felt fond of him for his mother's sake if not his own, but I never had considered Nelly Trundle was going to be just the right one for him, though sometimes couldn't but be shaken in my doubts when I marked how fond of him she was. And then came what was a thunderbolt for the whole pack of us except the young man himself. All tending to show it is next thing to impossible to grasp what may be afoot in a fellow-creature's mind, especially if he chances to be one of the tongue-tied sort.

CHAPTER VI

Norton Blanchard was a good farmer and a man of simple tastes like his father. And he agreed with Aaron, that the only things ever troubled him were public holidays, which he held should never have been invented. He lived for his work and he said the time wasted and the days it took for an average farm hand to get over public holidays and settle down again lost the country thousands of working days. There's a lot can't be really happy unless they are

disorderly, and if your happiness is to get drunk, then no doubt your usefulness is bound to suffer. None ever did his duty in a more steadfast manner than Norton, and he was just and respected. A big, rather handsome chap, yet, owing to his lack of speech, misunderstood. All I really knew about him was that his favourite food never changed. Give him broad beans and red meat and he showed perfect contentment, and you couldn't annoy him with an apple pudding, which he was always ready to welcome at dinner or tea.

Why he appeared to have fixed his affection on Nelly Trundle, or what she saw in him were puzzles equally hard to determine. But she made no secret of her choice. Among possible suitors was Adam Parsons of High Chimneys, who still wanted a wife; but, like everybody else, he knew his chances were small against my nephew and the only thing remaining to settle the matter was for Norton to speak. He was at Owls' Roost a great deal, but remained dumb for his own reasons; and then Nelly's people hatched a plot to bring him to the scratch and have done with the job for good and all.

Then came a day when I was returning with Prudence Trumble from a revel, and we were laughing at the fun of the fair and she was singing, when suddenly Norton Blanchard galloped along on his horse and drew up and walked beside us. He hadn't been to the fair but was on his way home from somewhere. He grinned at us and spoke to Prue.

"Go on with your singing," he said.

"Lord, Norton!" she answered. "I can't sing. 'Tis Nelly that can sing, not me."

He considered this, but soon made short work of her.

"You're a liar!" he said, then galloped on.

I was a bit vexed with such rudeness and told the girl I found myself inclined to doubt sometimes, despite his virtues, if my nephew was quite right in his head. But she held him a masterful and clever man with his own deep ideas about courting and everything else.

"You mark me, Pete," she foretold, "he'll strike like a hawk and properly astonish us all."

Then she told me what they were going to do.

"A watched kettle never boils over," she said, "so we've made a plan. The time has come for father and mother to take their annual holiday and rest, and they are going to Sidmouth this year and Nelly goes with them. That's to give Norton his chance. He can have Nelly all to himself at Sidmouth without the familiar faces round him at Owls' Roost and take her off for excursions on his own. Here he feels there are eyes on him from behind every hedge and he knows that mother and I fade out when he comes to us, but all these devices

only put him off his stroke and make him miserable being so shy and proud as he is."

So it was: the three Trundles went off to Sidmouth and it looked as if it was going to work, for Grace told me a few days later how Norton had said it was a good idea for them to go, and when she hoped he might find time to go down to see them, he had answered, "Very like I may. It depends on circumstances."

That was a long speech for him.

The Trundles went and, two days later I walked over to Owls' Roost to see Prudence and hear if she had any news. I strolled into the house-place without knocking and there to my amazement, was Norton sitting smoking his pipe and Prudence, under a good bit of agitation, clearing away dinner though nearly tea-time. She was evidently in a twitter, but Norton looked to be as usual so far as I could see. He got up when I appeared, stared at me rather wildly and knocked out his pipe.

"She'll tell you," was all he said and then walked straight out of the house!

"What the mischief was he doing here?" I asked and Prudence fell into tears and related an amazing story, yet every word true.

"Never did such a thing hap and I don't know whether I'm alive or dead," she began, then dropped a plate and broke it to pieces, for she was shivering all over.

"Sit down and control yourself, Prue," I commanded. "Grow calm. He looks to be out of his mind."

"I thought so at first," she answered. "He rode over round about noon and asked for some dinner! I begged to know if he was bound for Sidmouth and he said that depended on me—not him. He was anxious and his eyes rolling. I got food and begged to know if anything was amiss. And he said there was a lot amiss and wished I'd shut my chatter and listen. But he grew clear enough once he started and told me how his family and mine and especially Nelly had all been running after a mare's nest!"

Prudence panted to get breath.

"A mare's nest!" I exclaimed. "Who ever ran after a mare's nest, child?"

"Everybody," she answered. "Everybody but Norton; but being the man he is, he failed to put us right. Then, when father and mother and Nelly went, there came an overmastering determination in him to put it right. And—and he chose me to hear about it first."

"Why you, Prudence?" I asked.

"It's like this. Hard to believe but God's truth," she said. "He never wanted Nelly at all—in fact he don't even like her! He said

In fact they ought to be very glad about it, knowing you chosen by a good, though odd man."

"Not a bit odd to me," she said. "It's amazing how his words proved my admiration for him was right. He's wonderful."

"The fly in the ointment looks to be Nelly," I continued. "You are thinking of her painful shock; but the right course about that is to take the bird's-eye view, Prudence. There will be quite as good fish in the sea as Norton for her, and though she may show a bit of temper and say some hasty words, she'll soon be on with a new love after the first jar. In fact the whole situation ought to shine out clear enough for everybody when they hear the news."

"So long as you don't think I should have refused the man——" said she.

"I don't well see how you could refuse him if you loved him and knew he had been straight from the first," I answered.

"And what line of action ought he to follow to-morrow, dear Pete?" asked Prudence.

"There's no doubt as to that and I wonder you didn't fix it up at once," I said. "He told you that it would depend on circumstances whether he went to Sidmouth and no doubt it did: it depended on whether you took him, or did not. Now he's got you, of course, he must go and open his mouth for once."

Then I advised her strongly to go with him.

"It's your place to stand up for him now," I said, "and face the world for him if need be; so let him take you to Sidmouth and, while he's explaining things to them, you can cheer up Nelly and make her see sense. Rub into her that Norton didn't haunt Owls' Roost on her account but only to get the chance of seeing a bit of you, which he never did."

"I'll go," promised Prudence, who was well-named in truth, for she proved a most patient and far-seeing girl. The pair of them went to Sidmouth and surprised the Trundles no doubt, but they were not asked to stop over the week-end, because Nelly showed a good bit of feeling. In fact she went up to her bedroom and wouldn't see either of them again. Prudence and Norton cleared out in a few hours, therefore, and came home, and she wrote all she had to say to her sister, and by the time the farmer finished his holiday and returned, the match had become everybody's bit of news. Which rounded off the affair of Norton's courting except for a little item arising from it.

It fell out, the day after Prue and my nephew had visited Sidmouth, that I chanced to be standing at my wicket gate waiting for Micah

to come to his dinner from the smithy. And there passed me Abel Parsons on his way home.

"Stop a minute, Abel," I said. "There's a bit of news."

"I'll bet I know it," he answered. "You're going to tell me that Norton Blanchard has gone to Sidmouth and found his tongue and got Nelly Trundle at last."

"He's been to Sidmouth sure enough," I answered, "and found his tongue, but he hasn't got Nelly and never wanted Nelly. My nephew has got Prudence, who was always the one he wanted. Nelly's free as air."

He grasped my meaning for he had a quick-moving mind. In fact it moved too quick even to give him time to thank me for my information. Whatever else Abel might be, he was always faithful to his twin.

"By God!" he said and was gone.

There's nothing like catching a fellow-creature on the hop and that's what Adam Parsons did with Nelly. He was in Sidmouth the next day and stopped there till they all came home together a week later; and then, before the people had done chattering about Norton's triumph, they learned of the still greater event that Nelly had taken Adam.

They were unions that worked out very well and all the parties are still alive and good companions in the farming business. Nelly Trundle found her husband a light-hearted, lively fashion of man who enjoyed pleasure as well as she did, and Prue settled down at Birch Hanger much to the satisfaction of her father-in-law and Grace. She pleased Phyllis, too, for my sister was getting on now and found herself able to relinquish a good few of her dairy items to Prudence. Among her other arts Norton's wife had the cleverness to make him open his mouth much more frequently than of old, and Aaron always declared that his son would talk oftener in a day as a married man than he did in six months as a bachelor. Aaron himself began to slip past middle-age now, but he owned to no weakness yet, except a weakness to tire himself out at work.

Running over myself and my family at this time, I mark how my father's second son, James, has never entered into the story of my life, which might seem a mannerless action on my part; but he never did enter into any of our lives, for the reason that before he was twenty, James Blanchard went foreign. To Canada he travelled and only came home again once when still a young man. He prospered and kept in touch with home for a while, but he married a Canadian and his interests were all out there. He had written to subscribe to father's tombstone and paid one-third of the cost and he would have

welcomed any of us if we had felt wishful to see Canada, but none of us did. He was a trapper when first he went abroad and sent mother a wondrous fur coat, but he had long given up that manner of life and taken to farming. He owned his farm now and grew corn on a huge scale and made far bigger money than ever was made by a farmer at home. And that's all we knew about him. But it was just now that Aaron heard from his brother's wife how James had died owing to an accident on his farm. And very sorry we all were to know it. We all sent letters to her and she wrote that her eldest son was going on with the farm and sent us a newspaper account of her husband's funeral, showing the number of people who went to it and how highly he stood in the regard of his neighbours. So now of our parents' family, only Aaron and Phyllis and I were left alive.

We talked over brother James when he was gone, and it was Aaron who remembered most about him.

"He was greater than any of us," he said. "I've heard father say that James had a large bent of mind won out of his wide experience. The one time he came back from Canada he said it was amazing how a pin-point island like England had stretched out to conquer regions of the earth so vast, that it could be put down and lost upon them.

"Strange he gave up trapping," said Phyllis. "As a young boy he was always out to slaughter anything that offered."

"He was, and father felt surprised when he changed," explained Aaron. "But he did. All boys like killing things: it's the natural savage in them; but with James, when he grew into manhood, he passed that stage and sickened of it when it became his business. He told me that, after you'd seen what trapping does to dumb creatures, your soul turns against it."

"I've thought myself sometimes that if we women knew all that some poor beast went through before its fur came round our necks, we'd feel cold rather than warm at the touch of it," said Grace.

That was an interesting item and just such as you might have expected from Grace, who felt great sympathy for animals. Hunting and shooting are so much a part of country life that most of us are brought up with it as a natural and cheerful part of existence. Aaron himself was fond of sport and so was our father before him, though no man could deny them a love of animals. They'd hunt a fox half across the county with a good appetite and then sit up all night to tend a sick dog. As for fur coats and such adornments, never having the power to get such things, the question how I might hap to feel in them didn't arise until a good few years later in life. Then, when I was properly old, Janice brought me a wondrous sealskin jacket which comforted my bones so much that, God forgive me, I never

thought upon the seal. A difficult subject seemingly and all turns on whether you regard certain creatures to be vermin or hold them the Almighty's work, like yourself, and equally entitled to enjoy their short lives regardless of what you think about them. I said as much to Micah one day and he took his usual, practical view of the question.

"Carried out to its proper conclusion," he answered, "that would mean we ought not to kill a wasp, nor wear a bird's feather in our hats without shame."

"There's reason in all things," I said.

"No there isn't, Pete," he declared. "There's no reasoning powers in anything but us. There's not a mite of reason in Nature and she's just as busy to prosper a green fly, or a nettle, or a louse, as she is to advance our prospects. She mothers a maggot as willingly as a human babe and we must needs use our reason to fight Nature by day and night, because we'd parlous soon be in queer street if we didn't."

"And yet, as if that wasn't a big enough job, we must fight among ourselves also and slaughter each other by the million every time we go to war!" I said.

"That's true, and that's where our gift of reason fails us," admitted Micah.

Round about now I took to raising pheasants and won a great deal of pleasure from the amusement. Not, of course, pheasants such as a gamekeeper may raise by the hundred for his employer, but the choice and beautiful varieties of pheasant that are so lovely they add a pleasure to life if you can see them every day: Golden pheasants and Silvers and Amhersts and such. I had a friend at Kingsbridge who bred these creatures for her living and did very well by them, and from her I got the eggs and put them under a Seebright bantam hen to sit upon. Because barnyard fowls are too heavy-footed to rear pheasant chicks; but a bantam answers the purpose well and makes a trusty foster-mother for them. That was a joyful pastime for me and Micah got to throw himself into it also and became a great fancier and very learned in the subject. We agreed that it was little likely you could see a more dazzling fowl in all England than the first Amherst cock we raised after he came into his full plumage.

My other nephew, Barnaby, also gave me occupation now, for I helped him and his wife to restock their shop and advise upon the subjects most likely to bring custom. Barnaby favoured dry goods and his wife had a fondness for groceries, so they were forced to give and take, but found no difficulty in doing so. Between them they covered pretty near all the requirements of Beesworthy and Barnaby

claimed to have raised our standards of living and made the people a lot nicer in their demands.

"What were needless luxuries in the old time before us have now grown to be the common necessities of life," he told me once, "and you have only to compare what satisfied folk twenty-five years ago to see how I've led the public taste upward."

I was able to support him there for, looking back to days before he was born or thought of, it seemed easy to mark how living had bettered. In fact those were pretty good days in England after the Great War had been cleaned up and the Empire began to grow richer.

For me, next after Micah's welfare, Janice and my pheasants occupied me happily enough and my nursling got taken into a London theatre presently and received with great friendship by the audiences. Mr. Townley read about her in papers he took in and told me how Janice was reckoned among the loveliest things seen of late upon the stage. It sounded a wild fashion of play to my ears, but he explained that it was built on a fairy story from the Golden Age of Greece, whatever that may have been.

It ran like this. A young man called Pygmalion fashioned a statue out of white marble, and he made such a good job of his task that, when it was finished, he fell in love with it. He had carved a lady and lost his heart to his own wondrous cleverness. And Mr. Townley said that artists are apt sometimes to fall in love with what they have created themselves, which may be the sole comfort they get out of their works, when nobody else falls in love with them. Anyway, Pyg was so pleased with his beautiful statue that he prayed to some heathen goddess to turn his marble maiden into a flesh-and-blood girl and breathe the breath of life into her. The heathen goddess pleasured him and, sure enough, his statue came alive, and the first thing she did on finding herself a human woman was to fall in love with Pyg! Well, Janice it was who played the statue and came alive, and Mr. Townley showed me a picture of my blessed lass coming to life and alighting down off the pedestal where she had been set. Janice herself sent me some photographs of herself and Pyg, and she looked a proper angel, while as for the man who had made the statue, he was young and handsome despite his scanty clothes and I fell to wondering if their make-believe love might turn into the real thing. The play ran on for a long time and Janice badly wanted me to keep my promise and adventure up to London and stop with her at her flat. So I wrote to her and said I'd turn the matter over and consider whether I could leave Micah and the pheasants for a week-end and see her perform and go to a service in St. Paul's Cathedral, which was always a fancy of mine. I asked how it felt to pretend to love a

young man with all her heart night after night and also at an afternoon performance on Saturdays; but she wrote back that Pyg was married and had three children in real life, and that, as a matter of fact, she thought him rather a stupid young fellow away from his job. So my imagination played me false there.

But I decided to go, and left the pheasants in Micah's care and noted down a few things to buy for him that nephew Barnaby could not be expected to sell. It was a great experience and I always felt glad afterwards that I had seen Janice act in London and hear the applause and remember how lovely she looked and the music of her voice. They sold photographs of her in the shops at a shilling each, but she was just as usual, not puffed up in the least at her success. Her actress friend talked to me about her when she wasn't present and assured me that my girl had great talents and would be a leading actress some day. Angela Fern she was called—a pretty name—and Janice told me she was the best Lady Macbeth on the stage.

"And who might that be, my love?" I asked and, on hearing, could only thank God I had never met such another in my circle of acquaintances.

"She may be out of harm's way in the theatre," I said, "but a dangerous creature to neighbour with."

I saw Janice act on the Saturday after I arrived and, on the Sunday, a number of her friends came to the flat to tea. All very nice people beautifully dressed and full of life and cheerfulness. Most belonged to the stage; but one was a young gentleman of title who evidently cared a lot about Janice. He was an "honourable" and very civil to me. In the evening I went to hear evensong at St. Paul's Cathedral and enjoyed the music and the sermon very much. An organ, rolling out and waking the echoes in a huge cathedral, is a most moving thing and I found myself shedding tears at such grandeur. Not being solemn by nature, it all threw me a bit off my balance, but I wouldn't have missed it. And the next morning I came home and marshalled up my ideas in the train so that Micah should get the story right in every detail. And I brought what he wanted—an electrical hair-brush because his hair was failing, and some special toothpaste and a sleeping suit of pyjamas and a Sheffield knife, that cost ten shillings, and a box of Arabian dates, grander and richer than what Barnaby ever stocked. Micah loved a date and he was used to plant the stones and raise up little palm trees that made nice pot plants if you looked after them with proper care.

A month or more later Janice wrote in strict secrecy to tell me that the honourable young man had offered to marry her. He was very well-to-do and would inherit a title presently, and she said

she had felt sorry for having to decline him, because it hurt him a great deal. "But I shall never love again," she said. "I have got nothing left to love anybody with but you."

CHAPTER VII

MICAH approved of everything I had brought for him except the pyjamas. A man once told him that these garments were much more comfortable to sleep in than a nightshirt and so I made him a pair and he had taken to them very kindly. But he was in two minds about my boughten ones. They were manufactured in stripes of pink and white and he held them too gay.

"I don't mind for you to see me in them," he said, "but suppose I was taken bad and called to summon Dr. Tanner? If he found me dressed up looking like a stick of coco-nut rock, it might well make him think I was a mental case."

I talked sense to him through my laughter, but his mind ran on, because now and again he took a morbid fit and thought upon his latter end. He did now.

"I wouldn't like to snuff out in anything garish," he said. "Your deathbed pyjamas ought to be purple, or grey, if not funeral black."

"You choose a pair to suit your fancy when next you go shopping, dear man," I said, "and we'll put 'em aside for the occasion."

Time went forward and we jogged along with it. Nothing happened to us, but changes were in the air and, meeting dear Simon Townley one day, I remember telling about it to him. He was old now, but stuck to Beesworthy and his remaining friends.

"There's a generation of young men springing up who live on the dole nowadays," I said. "Not their fault seemingly because the trades and occupations all look to be overfull and don't want 'em; so the young fellows can't learn and they see life in terms of the dole and don't get no forwarder."

He agreed as to this and thought that we should pay more heed to emigration and order things for thousands of willing and capable lads to go out into the Empire and help the nation's work.

"If other nations, like Germany and Japan, had our magnificent colonies," he said, "they would see their rising manhood was sent to develop them; but we allow our surplus of boys to waste their time on pleasure and politics. The blame lies not with them, but their rulers."

"The young cry out for a new thing nowadays," I told him.

"They are not satisfied with the old paths and none too fond of work even when they can get it. Micah's man, Fred Vosper, at the smithy has wonderful ideas, Mr. Townley. He wants a flame new world."

"Until security and goodwill are commonplaces," replied the old lawyer, "there is no chance for any new world worth living in, Pete. And how would Micah's man advance those causes?"

"I couldn't tell you," I answered. "Fred says that where the world goes wrong is in making it needful to work to live. He says to make work a necessity must be all wrong, because man is no more industrious by nature than any other creature and work's mostly a stark cruelty thrust upon us to interfere with our happiness. To hear him you'd think the Lord had made us to play like kittens and be satisfied with a cork at the end of a piece of string all our lives."

"I know the sort," agreed Mr. Townley, "it's an age of dissipation Pete, and the meaning of work forgotten."

"Micah is of opinion that the people would be better for more recreation while they are young enough and spry enough to enjoy it," I told him. "He never had any recreation when he was young and ordains to make up for lost time now and recreate himself before it is too late."

This was quite true for, while work continued to be a great pleasure to him, as he slacked off, Micah found unexpected channels for a bit of fun and I was very glad to back him up. Fred Vosper did think more of his wages than his work no doubt, but so long as he earned his money, my husband had no quarrel with him and meantime found an increasing appetite for a holiday himself. Which led to the adventure that comes to my mind now.

Micah had a fanciful idea. He never favoured open boats, like I did, and I'd still go out now and again, with Bob Mason, or another fisherman, just for the pleasure of feeling a rocking craft under me and renewing my memories of Tom and old times; but now Micah was fired with a longing for the sea. He said that he would like to know if he was a good sailor and ordained to take a trip in one of the pleasure steamers that ran up and down the coast in summer. He moved with the times and now he wanted to see a marine engine at work and talk to a few engineers, if they would let him do so. I was delighted at this intention for I'd been on the paddle steamers with friends during the last few years and loved the deep sea at any time. So I praised him and had a great thought myself.

"If we were to travel as far as Dover or Folkestone," I said, "and spend a night there, then, with morning, we might cross the Channel in one of the famous packet boats and you could see their workings and set your foot in France; then we'd come back by a return boat."

But he shook his head and wouldn't go to such extremes as that.

"No, Pete," he answered. "No, my love. I've no wish to set my foot on France, nor yet travel up country so far as Dover. We'll take the steamer that plies from Dartmouth and works around the watering places, like Torquay and Exmouth and so far as Weymouth round Portland Bill."

So we did and I remember the jaunt very well indeed because it brought fame to Micah.

We got to Dartmouth early on a fine August day and were soon churning along to Weymouth with a tidy lot of holiday folk and a bit of music aboard in the shape of two old chaps who played a harp and a fiddle. It was breezy with a nice roll, and at first I feared for Micah, but I was thankful to find my husband far too interested in the huge engine that turned our paddle-wheels to spare any time for seasickness. He never felt a qualm, but peered down where the hot, oily air rose from the engine room and presently, when we were hove to at Torquay for a bit, he made friends with the engineer, who told him he could look round if he had a mind to it when we were off again. He found that engine room a deal more interesting than anything on deck and, after he came up and had a cold meal with me in the saloon of the steamer, down he must needs go again; and he said the chief engineer was as agreeable a man as ever he had met with and full of fine knowledge. So I spent most of my time chatting with the women on deck and looking at the coast line as we slipped along. And then, when we were rounding the Bill for Weymouth the accident overtook us. Micah tried to explain it to me afterwards though I never did master what it was; but something broke in the machinery and suddenly to our surprise the wheels stopped going round and the boat stopped. I was just wondering why when my husband rushed up from below and said there was a small catastrophe—no danger—but we'd got to put things right before we could go on. He took off his coat and waistcoat and bowler hat and told me to mind them; then he turned up his sleeves over the elbows and blazed with excitement and went off with the captain as if he belonged to the ship. It was a very untoward mishap and the old engineer never remembered another like it; but the wonderful thing was that it called, not so much for a marine expert, but a first-class smith, and the one man they most wanted at that moment was just such as Micah. There was the furnace and the tools and a master of white hot iron all ready and waiting to handle them, and he knew exactly what to do and how to do it. Through his skill and strength he had the engine working and the boat under way again in less than an hour; and the captain declared that if ever he had met with an example of Providence

working in the open, it was to send my husband on that particular sea trip. He told me Micah had done a grand job of work, and I said:

"Be that as it will, he's spoiled his best flannel trousers, captain, and your company ought to give him the price of a new pair."

The company sent him a letter of thanks and a five-pound note a week later, and so taken was he with the adventure that, before the summer ended, we went two more trips in the *Devon Queen* and found ourselves very welcome. The old engineer lived at Dartmouth. Noah MacAndrews he was called and he'd been in steam for forty-two years.

"All going to show," said my husband, "how we never know what a day may bring forth."

There's little else round about that time cleaves in my memory, except the postmistress at a village not five miles away from us, though a very great thing happened at Birch Hanger about a year later. As for the postmistress, so Barnaby told me, because he was in touch with her at our post office, the poor woman had taken to drinking methylated spirits to keep up her heart, and now the habit had so gained upon her that she failed in her duties and was dismissed.

But now a tragic event overtook my family and me with them. My brother Aaron was growing old like father somewhat before his time counting his life in years, but rheumatism had gained upon him a lot of late and marred his labour, which was all that life really meant to him. I remember an extra bad attack he had, when Grace made him stop in his bed for a bit and sent for Dr. Tanner, and the doctor kept him there. I was sitting beside Aaron when Tanner paid his second visit and heard what passed between them. Aaron suffered from a cruel fashion of rheumatism called arthritis and it hardened his joints and hurt him shocking, but to-day, chatting so pleasantly as he could, the doctor didn't make any mention of that. He just said my brother was suffering from Anno Domini and must be patient, and Aaron flared out at him. I knew there was such a thing myself, because talking to Mr. Townley, he told me he was suffering from it and added it meant no more than weight of years: but Aaron didn't happen to have heard of Anno Domini before and answered sharply.

"No such thing!" he said. "I'm a darned sight too old to catch any of your new fangled diseases. 'Tis bone-shave—a very common ailment—and I don't ask you to cure it. Only God Almighty could do that and He won't, so all I demand from you is physic to damp down the blasted pain at night and let me sleep and be fit to rise of a morning."

He never did like Dr. Tanner and a good few others of the old dispensation felt the same.

"If only Meadows was back," I have often heard old people say. But Dr. Meadows had gone home by now and Phyllis and Grace and I all went to his funeral.

"It's fitting that I should go," said Grace at the time, "for he brought both my sons into the world."

Dr. Tanner, of course, couldn't compare nor yet compete with our wondrous physician from the past. He meant well and younger people swore by him, but he lacked the comfortable words and his bedside manner was bleak. Not that I minded, because manners in general are bleak nowadays and the rising generation seem mostly too busy to be civil and the schoolmasters don't teach it. But Aaron's dislike to Dr. Tanner grew and he started crying out for a second opinion when the fatal thing overtook us all. He had got on his feet again after his attack and was going round about on two sticks, though far safer in bed still if he had only known it, when, owing to the weakness of his legs, he slipped on a frosty morning and broke his thigh bone. They carried him in and got him to bed and all went pretty well at first, though Dr. Tanner told me in private there was always a danger for man of my brother's age to be forced to keep his bed.

"Mr. Blanchard is older than his age, just as his father was before him," he said.

"He's done the work of two men all his life," I answered, "and may have aged too quick accordingly."

Anyway, he warned us and he proved in the right unfortunately for, lying on his back all the time, Aaron's lungs couldn't stand the strain and, just as his bone was mending, he got an inflammation and fell in danger. Then he turned against the doctor more than ever and a specialist came from Plymouth and was tender and encouraging but useless. Three days later my brother passed away and his sons, Norton and Barnaby, were beside him when he did so—also Grace, his wife, and Phyllis and myself, his sisters, and the nurse. Too many in the room at the time, I thought; but he was past caring by then and unconscious and his troubles over. A queer mixture, like most of us, was Aaron Blanchard—like a thistle not lacking for thorns, but with plenty of soft down in his nature too.

So Norton and his wife, Prudence, rose to be head of Birch Hanger; but Grace stayed on there, for she couldn't face life away from it, and Phyllis also stayed. They had both grown fond of Prudence and found her a tower of strength. Norton never departed from his father's rules and ordinance, just as Aaron himself never departed

from our father's ways before him, and Prudence, bearing children, it looked as though the farm must defy changes and carry on into yet another generation of the Blanchards. For the rest nothing overtook the world at large to interest Micah and me.

Life you may say for the middle-aged is a dull fabric shot with a bright thread here and there. Janice continued to be the bright thread in mine. She came and went. She loved her work still, but I gathered that she felt to fall short of perfection and was discontent with her results. Life hadn't disappointed her: she'd disappointed herself because she wasn't doing all she hoped for. Her gifts weren't up to her own high standards, or so she felt, and the thought troubled her.

"So long as you satisfy the people and are well thought upon by the judges of acting, my love, what need to be down in the mouth about it?" I asked her. "You have won a name for being a fine performer and earn good money by it."

"I know, Mother," she said, "but there's something wanting, and when the something wanting lies in yourself, it's most difficult to find. I find it in dreams though. Dreams are queer things. The difference between them and real life seems to be this: that in dreams nothing surprises you and in real life everything does. Real life is like a play, or a concert, or a picture gallery, or a wondrous view or a great catastrophe. Full of surprises—pleasant and otherwise, with death the grandest surprise of all perhaps. But in dreams you may find yourself in the most fearful circumstances, or doing utterly mad things without any idea they are mad. I dream now and then that I am acting magnificently with superb art and holding huge audiences spellbound. I dream that I am doing with inhuman perfection what, in sober truth, I doubt if I can do at all: that is to act. And then I wake up and see the truth of myself."

Well, I couldn't make top or tail of this stuff, but gave her a bit of advice and she showed herself disposed to take it.

"If you can do anything well enough to make your living at it, there's no call to be down-daunted about your powers," I told her. "Folk don't worry as to what you think of yourself if they think well enough about you to pay to see you. But you're tired, Janice, so why not give play-acting a miss for a bit and go free and devote your time to seeking your country house and setting it in order? You have got plenty of money, so find a home, where you'll be as happy as your nature lets you. Then, after you have laid off the stage for a spell, you can go back again refreshed and up to the mark. You'll be lovely to look at for years yet; in fact you're one of the lucky ones

in that respect for, as you're beautiful with the beauty of youth still, some day you'll go on being beautiful with the beauty of age."

That made her laugh, but she confessed that she had grown a little stale with her hard work over ten years and that a spell away from it might take her back in better tune to satisfy herself.

"I begin rehearsals in a week's time," she explained. "It's a tragedy and I don't expect it will last very long. Anway at the end of the run, I will promise to take a real rest. Not too long though, because audiences have short memories and so have managers."

"A year's nothing, my lamb," I said. "Just drop art for a bit and find a sweet house down this way, not so far away from me. Stick to that and turn your back on the theatre for a while and grow a thought fatter meantime."

She kept her word and, when her tragedy was poorly accounted of by the public, she did start on a proper holiday and, in course of four months, came upon a pretty, restful dwelling-house near Dartmouth, overlooking the sea and with all modern requirements and a nice garden. It did her a deal of good house-hunting and messing about on the countryside and, thanks to all the business of her house, a year slipped away before everything was to her liking and the furniture bought and the place renovated to suit her taste. Then she began to say she had idled long enough and must do her duty and earn her living again in earnest. She got a man and his wife to run her place and I came and went and looked after her staff and stayed with her for three days when finally she set up to live there. After that she began to grow restless, when the novelty wore off and she'd wintered there and invited a few London women friends down to help pass her time and enjoy her company. But, Janice was a happier woman by now than I had felt her to be for a long time past. I saw more of her for a while and loved her fine nature and high opinions better than ever. Only once did she ever mention the sad business of Morris Mayburn and spoke of him as if he was some distant happening in the morning of her days.

"Do you remember Father Mayburn, Mother?" she asked me once when I was stopping with her.

"I do," I said.

Then she showed me something that she had read in one of her London papers.

"He has gone to minister on a leper island," she told me, "and no doubt he will sanctify the rest of his life to suffering humanity."

"A grand task well suited to him no doubt," I said after I had read the announcement.

"A saint," she answered. "He will die out there and, in years to come, his Church will canonise him."

"Saints are difficult customers in private life as a rule," I answered, because I never could quite forgive the wonderful young man for turning down Janice. "Perhaps he'll teach the poor, stricken ones to play-act and brighten their lives a bit that way, my love."

"No: he came to regard art as a snare: something that too often comes between us and pure righteousness," she replied. "He will help the lepers to pin their faith on the happiness that heaven alone can promise them."

I passed these remarks lightly.

"It takes all sorts to make this world," I said, "and no doubt there's going to be all sorts in the next, Janice."

Her reigning mood was cheerful now and hope looked out of her eyes again. She went to work in London and I longed to hear she was pleasing herself better and found herself welcomed back.

At Beesworthy an interesting thing happened and very unexpected light was thrown for me on an event ten years and more old by now. Nothing to do with anybody I cared about and held to be no mystery, because the law had cleared it all up and decided as to what had taken place. But the law went completely wrong.

All those years ago our greengrocer, Billy Blades—the son of the old undertaker—had gone down for a dip in the sea one evening. He never came home to his supper. So his wife was left a desolate woman; but she buckled to and carried on their small business and kept her mouth shut for ten years. Then, during a parlous illness, she told me these amazing things, only to be sorry for doing so when she got well again. Nobody liked poor Constance Blades any more than they had liked her husband before her. The pair were childless, always quarrelling and said to be devious in business. After Constance fell sick there was not a soul to look in upon her, or cheer her up, so I went and passed a bit of time for the woman. Then, when she thought she was going home, she told me her queer tale. Her tongue had always been her weapon and never failed her and she and her husband had fought and patched it up again and again year after year. It was during one of the patches that freedom offered for them and, after an uncommon bitter row, Billy got an idea.

"I'll tell you a story hid from all mortal ears t'll this moment, Mrs. Widecombe," began the invalid to me after I'd fetched her some plums from my garden and she'd eaten them, because she honestly believed now she was going to die, and so a few ripe plums wouldn't matter either way. "I'll tell you the story and 'tis no odds if you tell it again after I'm gone. Ten and more years ago my beastly husband

and me had one of our full-sized battles and he said, 'How long, O Lord, how long?' and I answered, 'If you want to know how long, I can tell you, William, because to-morrow, though you doubtless forget it, we have been chained together seventeen years.' 'I didn't mean how long, but how much longer,' he explained, and went on to say that it was a pitiful thing how two people should only exist to torment each other from the rising up of the sun till the going down of the same. 'There's not a shadow of doubt, Connie,' he said, 'that you'd be a much happier woman, if I was took.' 'Most certainly,' I agreed. 'Same for you. You'd find yourself knowing real happiness again if I was in my long home and you had the world before you without me.' 'True,' he agreed. 'I would, though I envy the dead now and again. When I read how a poor soul went bathing down to Bude in Cornwall and never came back to shore, I didn't blame him, because who can say what he was leaving?' 'He left his clothes and a packet of pawn-tickets,' I answered, because I had read the account myself."

Mrs. Blades took a rest and ate her last plum. Then she continued.

"My husband got his great idea at that moment. 'Suppose,' he said, 'that I went bathing and my clothes were found and naught else, how would you feel?' 'Thankful to God,' I told him. 'Well, suppose I done it?' he asked. 'Why suppose anything so mad?' I said. 'What I'm aiming at is this,' he explained. 'I haven't any intention of drowning myself to let you out, but imagine how it would be if my working clothes and a farewell letter to you were found—say at that lone spot they call Red Cove. There the things might lie, along with my Waterbury watch and pipe and tobacco pouch, with marks of feet stretching down to the sea and none coming back. What would be the general opinion then?' 'The general opinion wouldn't matter a damn against my private opinion,' I answered, and he granted that, but pointed out I could keep my opinion to myself. 'The general opinion would prevail, especially if I left a farewell letter,' he told me, 'and in course of time you would be given leave to presume my death—and there you are!'"

Mrs. Blades brightened up and smiled at her recollections.

"It was a grand thought of course," she said, "and I answered if he could do such a thing and get away with it, I'd always remember one kind action about him. Then the more we talked, the cheerfuller we grew and I only wished he'd thought of it fifteen years sooner. He held the hard part would be mine, not his, because I'd be called to identify the clothes and while my natural instinct would be to jump for joy, I should have to show myself cruel put about. 'I'm no actress,' I said, 'and there's no call to pretend seeing that everybody who

knows me would be well aware of what I was really feeling.' Then he went into details but we didn't agree very well when it came to bargaining. He'd saved a bit and now he argued that I should have enough money to carry on the shop and pay the rent, while he kept the rest. And I said it was going to be fifty-fifty or I wouldn't go on with it. 'My idea would be to draw out my money,' he explained. 'I'd tell everybody I'd got a wonderful bargain and presently I'd cry out I'd been swindled by some rogues. Then, when I looked to have taken my life, the reason would appear and nobody put the blame on you.' I doubted from the first whether he'd got the courage to carry out such a deception, but his hatred of me kept him going clever as a monkey. We hadn't been so friendly, nor yet seen alike so close, since the day we married. 'For you to be swindled by a confidence trick would be natural,' I said, and he replied that it was beastly things like that made him carry on and get out of range of my blasted tongue, for evermore. We didn't waste any time telling each other what we were going to do after. 'If you'll keep out of London and my eyesight, that's all I ask of you in future,' William said and I laughed. 'You'll cut a fine figure in London,' I told the creature and all he answered back was it's well known a candle can't burn with the extinguisher on—meaning me."

Constance rested a bit, then reached to the high-water mark of her confession.

"The night came at last," she continued, "quiet and peaceful and well suited to his task. He put a coat over his best clothes and took his worst ones and shoes and socks all complete in a parcel and cleared out. 'You can tell the police I've been a bit unlike myself of late and went for a dip at Red Cove, as I'd got into the habit of doing. Say I left round about seven and have not come back. Go to the police station at nine o'clock.' Those were his last words to me. I didn't reply and he went out of my sight for evermore."

"So he had the last word after all," I said.

"He did, and the last deed likewise," she answered. "I laid the supper at eight and put a bottle of stout by his place and then, at five minutes to nine o'clock, I went over to the police station, with the bad news. And little did I know that William was hid in the dark, not ten yards off our house, waiting for me to go. That was a part of his scheme the beast hadn't told me about. I broke my news to the inspector at the station and everything went by routine. The constable found Billy's clothes under the cliff and his marks going down to sea-level and a bit of paper with 'good-bye all' wrote upon it, and when they came back to me, I took on all right having a tidy deal more to take on about by that time than ever they knew. It wasn't hard to be

upset when I looked at his clothes and his watch and his pipe, because, after he saw me off to the police station, the traitor had nipped in and made a clean sweep. He'd took my money and my feather boa and my trinkets and my tokening ring among 'em. Twenty pounds was all he'd left of my store, and then he'd drunk his bottle of stout and vanished. And I had to choose between telling the truth and getting the blackguard hunted down and caught and brought back, or keeping shut about it and carrying out my part."

Mrs. Blades panted and lived out that fearful problem again in her thoughts.

"So you cut your losses, Connie?" I asked.

"I cut 'em and hid my rage," she answered, "so, when the police came with his clothes, there was another bottle of stout on the table and a clean glass beside it. You see the little devil's cleverness. No doubt they might have traced him if they'd started a hue and cry, but the police didn't smell a rat and nobody found any reason to doubt he'd done himself in, seeing his various good reasons for doing so."

"It was said you put on no black for him I remember," I said.

She didn't take any notice of this remark, her thoughts still with Billy Blades.

"I often wonder what became of the snipe in London, if he ever did go there," she concluded. "I thought upon him for a few years, hoping he'd been robbed, or run over, or something like that; but most probably he went in for crime and got locked up."

It had cheered her and done her good to tell me the truth about her husband and she recovered her health soon after and carried on as usual. And, of course, I kept her story secret till the poor woman died in earnest not long since.

CHAPTER VIII

CREEPING nearer and nearer now—approached something to overbalance all else and leave me storm-foundered as never yet. It looked also that a properly huge affair was in sight for the world at large, or so Mr. Townley appeared to think. He always looked ahead and understood politics, which very few of us did in Beesworthy, and for my part and Micah's part we never gave them much thought, so, when the dear old lawyer told me that he couldn't but see signs of fearful happenings, I took no count of it and judged it was only old age dimming hope. And Micah agreed with me. In his book-reading he had marked how great men of the past, when they came

to die, always reckoned their countries were on their beam-ends and ripe for destruction.

"And yet," said my husband, "what do you find, Pete? The nations weather their storms and carry on and for every hero that dies, another turns up; and so will it be with the British Empire, no matter who steers the ship for the minute."

He said that politics was just a business, like any other calling, and that England stood too strong and tough and deep-rooted ever to be shaken from her foundations by a passing Government.

"Most of the people in the world trust England," he said, "and the wonder to me is how anybody is fool enough to go to war with us, seeing the result of making war on England is always the same. We're bad starters, but never was known a war made against us that didn't end the same way."

Supported by these opinions Micah couldn't feel politics to matter a lot; but he always said he was a Liberal by his convictions and should so continue.

My nephew, Barnaby Blanchard, on the contrary thought otherwise. Lord Beaconsfield was his idea of the finest leader England ever had, and he declared it an amazing thing for such down-trodden people as the Jews to have produced a man who had risen to be our Prime Minister.

But both Micah and Barnaby agreed that we had earned our prosperity and success by going straight and treating other nations in an honourable manner. They considered Mr. Townley's fears were imaginary and thought it a pity he should make himself uneasy as to the future, especially seeing that, for a man of his great age, the future needn't worry him in any case.

"You can leave the future of England in the hands of Providence," said Barnaby, "and it isn't worthy of such a good and useful man as Townley has been to fear for setbacks after he is called away."

My nephew took a bright view himself so long as the Conservative Party held the helm, but mistrusted what might happen if they lost hold of it.

"It is well known," he told Micah, "that Labour would scrap the Royal Family and the House of Lords and take over the Bank of England and the people's savings; and I grant you, if that was to happen, even Providence might find its work cut out to save the Empire."

"A case of wolves round the sheep-fold no doubt," agreed Micah, "but not in it yet."

Before things happened to wake my interest in my own lot above all else, another few years passed over us and left no mark. There

was one thing beyond the ordinary that meant much to my future, though it didn't look to be pointing in such a direction at the time, or until years after. Linda Gollop had hit upon a clever thought to improve her small means and she let a bedroom and sitting-room in her cottage, being quite content to live in the house-place herself. Since retiring from the laundry and losing David, she rented these rooms with advantage, and now there came to her a single man who settled down with her, paid his money regular and proved a very good lodger. He was not a native of Beesworthy but an old soldier who had been through the Great War in his prime and still bore himself in an upstanding and military manner. He had been a sergeant in a Guards' regiment and was now retired with a pension. A handsome man and friendly, well set up, temperate, good-tempered and one to make himself at home and win a welcome in any company. He liked to be addressed as "Sergeant" and it came natural to all of us so to call him. Linda was very proud of him and considered him the best in every way of her lets—some of which had proved a failure. Her successes she liked to introduce to her friends till she found that, as a rule, the lodgers didn't want to know her friends; then she took the hint and dropped that habit; but we got to know Sergeant John Winter through the smithy, because he called there one day with his motor bicycle for repairs. Which, of course, Micah did. The sergeant took to him for there was that about my husband always drew people, and so this foreigner got to be a new friend and would drop in upon us now and again and stop for a cup of tea sometimes. I liked him from the first because he was so clean and smart and self respecting. An alert, self-confident man, but not pushing and never much given to talk about himself. He refreshed me because he loved a joke and, as we got to know each other better, I could see the things I thought funny were just those things that amused him too. Now and again, when he was at our table and Micah made one of those remarks that always tickled my fancy, though never intended for a joke, the sergeant would see it just as I did and give me the ghost of a wink. A man's wink may be a bit of impertinence often enough, but the sergeant's good manners were outstanding and I never knew him to depart from them. A listener as well as a talker he proved himself, and while he and Micah didn't agree on all subjects, they made nice conversation and each respected the other's point of view. In politics the old soldier was all for private enterprise and competition. He had a great respect for capital, though lacking it himself, but he was a patriotic man and felt glad he had served his country and thankful to have come through his fighting days without hurt. What he might have been doing since, he didn't say but, with his great bodily energies

and quick mind, we felt no doubt he must have been busy one way and another.

War was a subject on which he and Micah differed.

"War," said Winter, "is what you may call the acid test of humanity and always will be. The Great War was fought to win freedom from war, but no, Widecombe: you and I will live most likely to see war break out again. It's Nature's way."

"Far from being Nature's way, war runs clean contrary to Nature," answered my husband. "It was never Nature's plan for the elder generation of humans to slaughter the young of their own species and wipe out millions of men, just when they were beginning to pull their weight and carry on civilisation. A most unnatural and unreasonable thing and the war spirit in the young ought to be snuffed out of them at school."

But the sergeant shook his head.

"You'll find the world isn't run by reasoning, and Nature don't know or care a thing about reason in any case," he said. "She's got her methods and war's one of them."

He had won a medal, which he showed us, but not to glorify himself. He was a modest fashion of man and didn't claim to have done more than his duty in the Guards; but he displayed a lot of strong feeling against the German nation and said, like Mr. Townley again, that they were bad losers and putting all their hearts into another war as soon as they found themselves ready to start it.

As time went on and he found himself welcome with us, he opened out a bit about himself. After peace returned he had found himself alone in the world—a situation that suited his independent nature. He lacked any near relations but claimed to have a few friends among old soldiers. He liked Beesworthy and had come there to get a little fishing through the summer months, but he doubted if he would stop during the winter, being used to a town half the year. He had no home of his own and, when I told him he might do well to marry and make one, he said the idea had crossed his mind.

"Sometimes I feel that way," he admitted, "but only off and on. For the present I'm content to be free and I shouldn't have much to offer a wife in any case, though no doubt I might find one—a widow for choice."

"Why somebody's leavings?" I asked.

"Because," he answered, "a relict might have her own leavings and a trifle of capital behind her. But not many well-furnished widows would be likely to fall in love with a poor old soldier."

I did not feel so sure about that, for I have known a lonely, comfortable woman fall for a poor man if he was the sort just to suit her.

Some better like a pet dog, or parrot, or other neighbourly creature willing to be faithful and do its best for a good home and security, while others aim higher and favour the thought of a pet man. But men, regarded as pets, only appeal to a limited class of us no doubt and, in any case, I couldn't see the sergeant content to be a widow's darling. No young woman would have looked at him naturally, or he at her. So I reckoned that he would continue to go fancy free all his life and die in cheap lodgings at the appointed time.

Little by little he edged himself into Beesworthy and got a mastery of our affairs and interests. For instance, when the vicar—a bachelor till now—suddenly took to wife a rich widow and some people said it was done for her worldly goods and no other reason, the sergeant upheld his reverence and pointed out both he and the lady had sporting blood and loved the chase, so when her husband passed on, what more natural and proper than she should console herself with a godly fox-hunter like Mr. Tozer?

"He waited till his hair was grey," said the sergeant, "but his patience is well rewarded by a fine, well-to-do partner, and for the elderly to join up to each other's advantage is a very sensible thing. The Church isn't paid any better than the Army, unless you are a top-ranker, and now, when he retires, the gentleman can do so in comfort."

Be that as it may, Mrs. Tozer never conquered the parish.

John Winter was very fond of the subject of money and how to come by it appeared almost his favourite topic.

"Seeing what a master of the ways of cash you are, sergeant, it's a world of pities you haven't got any," I told him once, and he laughed.

"I quite agree with you, Mrs. Widecombe," he answered. "I am clever in that direction—no credit to me, just a gift—but to handle money, you must have a tidy background of it to operate upon; and that I never enjoyed. I was a workhouse lad with soldierly instincts and very glad to join the Forces as soon as old enough to do so."

He was most sympathetic over the story of my first husband and his sad death, and said that none had gone to a hero's end to better purpose than he had done.

"Not near enough was made of the minesweepers," he told me.

The sergeant's poor luck in worldly matters didn't cast him down. I never met a man quicker to see the amusing side of daily life. A most humorous man and, with his sociable ways and powers of winning confidence and charitable outlook in general, he got on among us very well and we never felt him to be so foreign as most foreigners. He'd pick up amusing things, like a daw picks up any

odds and ends with a sparkle to them that catches his eye. He told us how he'd met old Farmer Puckridge and got him to talk about life as the ancient man looked on it.

"I go in for a glass of milk there now and again," said the sergeant, "and this time the old boy, sitting in the sun at his door, was pleased as usual to oblige me. We chatted and he asked me to guess his age. He looked a hundred, so I said 'seventy-five.' Then he told me he would be ninety next Michaelmas Day. 'And what have you made of your long life, Master?' I inquired and he gave me a very fine answer. I've lived and I've bred life and I've weathered life and I've thought about the ins and outs of life all them years, and be blessed if I can make top or tail of it yet,' he said. I saw he was prosperous," went on the sergeant, "so I remarked on it. 'Life made something of you at any rate, Mr. Puckridge, so you have played a good innings and no doubt got your runs on all sorts of wickets,' I told him. I'd heard Puckridge was a well-known cricketer in his day, so that pleased him, but he had an honest answer. 'As to that,' he said, 'I got my runs when the bowling was a darned sight easier than what it is now.'"

Though a lot spoke well of Winter, quite a few didn't feel so sure of him. Some said that he was sly and had more up his sleeve than his elbow. They pointed out that though he showed a clever touch to win confidence and listen to what people liked to tell him, he didn't unfold much about himself; but Micah, who liked him from the start and thought well of his character and opinions, believed that this was jealousy, because men felt the soldier to be better educated and happier in his manners than they were. And I agreed with him because I saw no slyness in him. In fact most women liked him very well, for he was apt to please children. They made the old soldier welcome at Birch Hanger, too, and Norton shared my husband's good opinion of him and Grace thought the wonder was he hadn't picked up a wife ere now to give him a few home comforts.

It must have been about two years after Sergeant Winter's arrival, upon a cloudless day in August month that my second grievous blow fell upon me and I lost my husband. Out of the blue that cruel stroke fell and whole weeks passed over my head before it was driven home and I could believe the truth. To his work he went as usual and our last words were about a little holiday we had planned after Janice had been stopping with us for a few days. She put the idea into our heads, for she had been visiting far away, alongside an English lake in the north-country, and enjoyed it greatly. So she decreed that we must see a bit of our own land and made all the arrangements and we were going up to Derwent Water in Cumberland at her wish

for our annual jaunt. Everything was planned and we should have the same rooms that Janice had occupied up there in a farm.

"It will enlarge our minds, Pete, and make us glad to come home if no more," said Micah as he left me for the smithy, and two hours after that a boy he employed came running to me, his face white as a maggot and his breath near spent. When he could speak he told me that an accident had overtaken Mr. Widecombe and I'd best to know and he was going on to fetch the doctor. Away he ran and I felt my head go round and my heart stand still. Then I hasted as fast as I was able, which wasn't very fast now, and got to the forge and found our two men terrible put about and Micah down on his back outside on the grass. Vosper told me what had happened while I knelt beside my husband and held up his head. He had been about to shoe an old mare which he had shod scores of times—a plough horse from High Chimneys—and, as he was bending to pick up the mare's hoof, she had kicked him on the side of the head. There was a lot of hornets about that year and nothing less than a hornet would have made that ancient creature kick, but they found afterwards she had been stung in the eye, just at the moment when Micah bent down to pick up her hoof, and lashed out in her agony and struck him on the side of his head. He was alive and breathing when I got to him, but quite unconscious, and when Doctor Tanner came, he told me that he would never be conscious again. They got the ambulance for him and took him to our cottage hospital; but he died in a few hours because his head bones were crushed and no human power could serve to save him. He'd left me in all his strength and happiness and trust in life, and now his life was ebbing out of him and his beautiful, gentle mind dead already. They brought him to his home and I sat by him till his last breath was drawn and my sister, Phyllis, sat with me. Then I kissed him "good-bye" and Phyllis and Grace stopped with me over the night. I felt to grow light-headed but fought it down and, remembered how I got up in the morning when Phyllis was fast asleep, exhausted by her efforts on my account, and made some tea for her and took in the milk and tried to get some order into my mind. Above a score of people must have come just to say how sorry they were and an inquest was called for and particulars given of what had happened and how the horse had killed Micah with no evil intent, but only struck out in self-preservation. And Doctor Tanner described the fatal injury and my Micah's death was pronounced accidental and the jury expressed sorrow for me.

I went to stay with my people at Birch Hanger for a while when it was all over, because I felt the urge to get out of my lonely house for a bit and view everything in a sane and patient manner. Linda

Gollop looked after my poultry for me while I was away and she told me what was doing. Janice had sped to me the day after his death and stopped close to me till after the funeral and watched over me, so again I found that when you are struck to the heart, it comforts you more to have your grief shared than sympathised with. I'd never hated anything before, but ever after I hated sudden death with all my soul, because twice it had burst upon me like a tiger and robbed me of everything worth living for. Janice knew Micah well and it made her a properly sad woman—sad for herself as well as me—to think my Micah was flung out of his good and happy life in that pitiful manner.

I went to the funeral and stood up to it as bravely as I could and, though I was not seeing very clear just then, I marked the six men who bore the coffin and noted that Sergeant Winter was one of them. The others were my nephews, Norton and Barnaby, Luke Caunter, Fred Vosper, Micah's head man at the forge, and Bob Mason, who had come to be a very close friend to Micah and myself. Looking at the floral trophies on the grave next Sunday, I saw that Winter's was the finest among them. He'd got very friendly with the people at Manor House, especially Mr. Hope, the head gardener, and he had laid a wreath of hothouse flowers with his sorrowful loss for a valued friend.

Out of all the bewilderment and surge of my feelings under this fearful stroke, little things come back to memory, while the misfortune grows overlaid now with the years piled up upon it. I remember the Reverend Tozer's funeral sermon, which was a fine performance and warned the people against the terrors of sudden death and urged the need to be ready for it. And how he said that Micah was a shining example of the man who lives so orderly that we feel for such a one death has lost its sting before it comes. But I knew better about that than he did for, if Micah had been spared to know he was going to die just before our annual holiday, then his grief for me would have added a sting to death without a doubt. In any case his grief for the woe coming to me must have added a cruel sting; so, since he was doomed to die, he couldn't have begun dying better than by losing all consciousness of everything. That was most merciful for him: not to know what his death would mean to me.

I remember Linda Gollop said a bold thing.

"It often beats me to know what God Almighty is up to, Pete," she said, when I went down one day from Birch Hanger to see my pheasants. "If a human was even to threaten such things, his fellow-men would run to put him right before it was too late. Why for

should a man like Micah be snatched from his good works and brought to dust just when he was doing the Lord's work with all his might?"

I was astonished to hear such a good Christian as old Linda make this remark, but couldn't in honesty reprove her.

"The Lord has need of him, my dear," I answered.

"But the Lord knew you had need of him still more, and whether or no, he can't be doing better work anywhere in Heaven than what he was doing here," she said.

"What has he done—what has he done to be torn away from all that was dear to him?" I cried out to Janice once myself.

And Grace, my brother Aaron's wife, who had been among those to look their last on Micah after he was dead at the hospital, said a thing I always remember.

"The goodness was still on his dead face when I saw it, Pete," she told me, "as if his soul was lingering there a minute before it took wing."

But I was the very last on earth that saw Micah's face before the lid closed down on him.

Full five-and-twenty letters I must have written to well-wishers while I stopped with Grace and Phyllis at the farm; and then the day came for me to gird myself, go back to my empty home and face all that called for doing.

CHAPTER IX

As you wax in years it grows harder to stand up to what fate brings you, because, when you are young, there is always the future and the hope that belongs to every young thing; but when the future has shrunk so small, then its promises don't shine so bright. For me now the future had nothing to offer and my trust in it took a very long time to come to life at all. In truth there was little after my great loss that showed any possible future to be worth while. I remained in this poor-spirited state for a good few months and surprised my neighbours, who were used to consider me pretty steady at heart no matter what fortune might offer. They knew I was left comfortably off and, being the widow of two industrious, saving, steady men, must now have a tidy background, so they felt I should face my losses with thankfulness that they were not worse, for I had got security which was a blessing to outweigh any misfortune. I realised all that of course, but I also knew that nothing can outweigh your love of life worse than losing what was better than life. I had felt the same when Tom

Appleby was taken from me, and I felt it even worse now, because my youth and years of hope were gone and so the second misfortune struck deeper than the first. I would have given security and everything else to have Micah back, if only to serve at his bedside for evermore and do my best to make his life worth living; so I wearied other people, no doubt, with all this self-pity. But then I began to see that I was wallowing in misery for myself and not Micah. If you can find the heart and patience to think straight on the subject, you will come to know that sudden death for the victim may be a mighty fine blessing. So such as are taken, quick as a flash of lightning, like Micah and Tom, or go to bed and painless sleep never to wake again, are the fortunate ones in truth and they who make a stir about it afterwards are only weeping and wailing for themselves, not the dead. And the moment I grasped that, I said to myself, "If he's happy where he is now, why the mischief do you want to go on being miserable where you are?" And when Mr. Townley came to drink tea with me, I told him how I was beginning to see how it might please Micah better if the thought of him in the good place was making me less sorry for myself at Beesworthy.

He approved of this idea.

"For the true believer, Pete," he said, "the death of those they love should be associated with their translation into a happier state, but the bitterness of our own loss generally prevents that comfortable thought."

I felt glad to hear his opinion. Death is cruel enough in any case when your dearest goes, but for them that cannot believe they will ever meet again, it must be a properly staggering crusher, like a pitch-black night without a ray.

The truth about me is that I was not built to reach any great tragical heights, like Janice could. I hadn't got it in my everyday quality to rise to triumphs, nor yet sink into everlasting despair. I couldn't defy time to mend my broken heart, or do anything grand like that. For a matter of months, yes; but not for evermore. No, I wasn't built to any fine pattern of performance, but only to jog along my road with a way of looking at things that seemed to bar any such high thinking as Micah and Janice always showed, because they had finer minds than mine. Some days I felt properly sick of myself and then, again, on others, I got to be bearable company again and the folk crept back and my pheasants crept back and both found me returning to my usual self and were relieved to do so. I began by neighbouring with the children. A child will often venture in his ignorance where no grown-up one would tread, and so reach to your heart without hurting it. I started to take notice once more, and

the first thing I noticed was how the people had shown their admiration for Micah by being so generous of good will to me. And I went about thanking them for their support.

Next time my treasure came down to her house nigh Dartmouth I didn't go to stop with her and she didn't ask me, well knowing her bright guests wouldn't be in key with my frame of mind; but I did go over for tea once and hired a motor-car they ran at the "Fisherman's Arms" to do so. George Forrester was gone now and the public-house in other hands, but the new landlord kept up a high reputation for the inn and had been received in a good spirit. Charles Dickson he was called and he himself drove me to see Janice.

"I'll drop you there while I do a bit of business in Dartmouth, Mrs. Widecombe," he said, "and then pick you up again and fetch you home."

Which he did and I took pleasure in the drive, and Janice greeted me and I heard her lovely voice again and kissed her lovely cheek and learned about her work. Her visitors had gone out for the day, to leave her to me, so I was not called to the task of meeting strangers. But now I had reached the stage to face everybody once more, and I begged Janice to come over and drink tea with me and bring any such friends as she might wish to see her old home. She promised to come and fetch one or two I would find pleasant characters. But the friends she made had always been very agreeable to me for her sake. In a manner of speaking I date my return to the business of everyday life from that drive with Charlie Dickson. The publican had known and admired Micah and was a friend, and he had a nice mind and known what it was to suffer himself. He dwelt on his past troubles as we drove home and told me they were responsible for his coming to Beesworthy.

"I was well enough situate up at Strete village," he said, "and should be there, at the 'Man and Gun' public, yet if it hadn't been my wife died. A partner a good bit out of the common she was and, when she dropped out, I couldn't stand the surroundings any more, because she haunted them. A curious thing, Pete, but the better attached you may be to a dead person, or even maybe a dog, the more they haunt you so long as you stop where you have shared life with them. My Emma was everywhere and signs of her handiwork couldn't be escaped no matter where I turned my eyes, so when I heard 'Fishermans Arms' was vacant, I made a clean cut for my peace of mind."

"I can well understand that, Charlie," I answered, "and if I had been a man, I doubt not I should be thinking to do the same at this moment; but my house is my own and to me it would feel like deserting all I've got left of Micah to travel away from it."

A woman's mind travels a very great deal faster than a man's and so we often arrive at conclusions while they are still only on the way. We have got an art to read what is lumbering along in their thoughts before they can ever put a name to it and I now perceived most unexpected and unfortunate imaginings slowly taking shape in certain quarters. Not in one only, but actually in a brace! Bob Mason, the fisherman and Dickson, the inn-keeper, both showed to me the same preliminary disturbance and threatened the same line of action under it. Even in my unhappiness and confusion, with all the landmarks lost upon my road, they showed a kindness for me and an interest in my future that could only be accounted for in one way. Needless to tell they barely knew themselves as yet what was drifting on the tide of their minds; but I knew what they were finding themselves up against. Such things rise like clouds and sometimes they dissolve and pass away again and no harm done, while at other times they mass into such a darkness that only a proper tempest will scatter them, so when I spared a thought to Bob and Charlie I hoped their feelings would soon die away and give them no trouble.

I noted a sad thing now: how the dead creep back into your speech again after time has passed by. They seem to return in a timid fashion at first, when their names still tremble on our tongues and our voices shake a little to utter them; but soon we get to mention them more bravely when memory grows fainter, and presently they are spoken of with indifference, as they slip away into the past and the old sweet, or bitter, flavour of them has departed. So they take their last place and lose any particular power they ever had to waken joy or sorrow, until those that knew them have sped after them and they vanish out of the minds of men. But, before that happens to them, they continue to challenge your thought and, according to the manner of the seed they sowed in life, so the crop that springs up after they have gone to earth.

Micah came back to men's tongues now when they spoke to me and, while there were left men and women to remember him, he won their favour, for never did he sow a bad seed anywhere; but although I gleaned up every kind word uttered upon him and treasured all, yet some had the brain and imagination to look beneath the surface and say cleverer and truer things about him than others. Nobody excelled in this matter like Sergeant Winter. He was greatly gifted as a student of character and, though many of us had known dear Micah far longer than he had and could furnish a list of his virtues beyond the sergeant's experience, yet, even I myself, who knew him as none other knew him, was bound to confess to my astonishment, how the old soldier had gotten to the very roots of my husband's

qualities. John Winter was nice about returning into my life and showed a tenderness which, in my early bewilderment and loss of gumption, I did not at first understand. He kept off me far longer than anybody and even hurt my feelings by never dropping in, or doing no more than smile and lift his hat to me when we happened to pass in the street; but that was all explained to his credit when, presently he opened out a bit and finally asked me, at a chance meeting, if I was free and disposed to give him a cup of tea upon the following afternoon. I answered that I should be pleased to do so, and he came and brought a bunch of greenhouse flowers with him. They were from the Manor, as I well knew, and I told him that he ought not to have done so; but he said that the head gardener had come to be a great personal friend of his and, when he heard who they were for, Mr. Hope was very pleased to cut them and sent his respects to me along with them.

I enjoyed seeing the sergeant again and hearing his precise voice and sensible opinions. He kept off Micah while he made a good tea and welcomed the cake I had made for him, remembering his taste in that matter; but he spoke chiefly of the Manor people and how he had met the lord of the Manor—old General Sir Anthony Balmain, Baronet, when he was going round the kitchen garden with Hope.

"A very fine man," he said, "and hearing that I was an old soldier, Sir Anthony showed friendship and was interested to learn of my service with the Guards in the Great War, where he commanded a Division."

"He's a most approachable gentleman," I told him, "and got a friendly word for the least of us."

"Very friendly indeed he was," continued the sergeant. "He had some good things to tell of the war and applauded one or two remarks I ventured to drop on the peace. He doesn't reckon the future is promising too well and sees danger signals. He wrote a book upon his life in the battlefield and he said that, if I liked to look him up at the Manor one day, he would give me a copy because he had quite a lot left on his hands."

"He gave Mr. Townley a copy of his book," I answered, "and he held it a high compliment."

"Still greater compliment to give me one," said the sergeant and, at a later time, he told me how he duly went up to the Manor and was let in and the master gave him a copy with his own hand and talked soldiering for twenty minutes.

John Winter ran on very pleasantly and, after tea, I bade him to smoke, for I'd long missed the smell of tobacco since Micah was gone.

And then he came to the subject of my loss and told what a blank he had found in his own life when that happened.

"I never met such another," he assured me. "Good men I have met of course, but your husband had the outstanding quality to find the good hidden in every sort of man and bring it to the light. You seldom heard him say a hard word even about a rogue, yet always found something in the sinner's character to set off against his crimes."

"He surely did," I agreed. "He'd make me impatient often enough, and when he read in the newspaper of a murderer being hanged, always doubted whether it might not be better to give such people a chance to make good and time to save their souls."

"Just his boundless mercy coming out," answered the sergeant. "Mercy you might say was Micah's strong suit. The only way to treat the ignorant is with mercy he'd always tell me. Ignorance isn't a crime in itself and only leads to worse because the malefactor was never taught better. Micah was a lot wiser in truth than most of us knew and I say again that his power to detect the good in a man, however deep it might be hid, was your husband's greatest gift."

Strange that just a new neighbour should show me more wonders in my husband's nature than I had discovered for myself through all the long years spent with him; but so it was.

The sergeant left this subject presently, feeling that he'd dwelt enough upon it for the time being. He smoked out two pipes before he left and once his eye looked up to the vase on the mantelpiece where Micah kept feathers from my poultry for cleaning his pipe. They were there yet, for I never moved them, and if Micah had been there, then the sergeant would have helped himself to one of them as usual. But, though I knew like an open book what was passing in his mind, he abstained from doing so. So I got up and gave him a feather.

"Thank you, Mrs. Widecombe," was all he said, but had the good sense to add no more. Then he went off, having gained his kindly object and brought me into a frame of contentment.

It was not so long after that I took to keeping ducks. I never bred ducks before, but the fancy came and so I started some and had a nice swimming pool fashioned in my garden and a safe house built for them by night. Khaki Campbells I got: those that lay green eggs and are pleasant to look upon. Birds were always my favourite creatures. They own to small wits, which is why most likely I loved to neighbour with them, but they have the power to interest me in their manner of life and humble pleasures, and I turned to them now more than ever and won distraction from their wants and ways. But a loss like mine strikes you from such a lot of different points that never a day

passes for many a month without a new stab struck into your defenceless heart. The lone meals had no taste in them and I cared not what lay on my plate because there was no other plate to watch over. I hated my food when none shared it and oh! how I hated going to bed by myself and no husband alongside me and no call to rise up for his morning cup of tea.

Just sorry for myself: that's what I was, and it's foolery to pretend that a man or woman lives who hasn't felt the same one time or another. Every mortal is called to endure it, and as long as you keep your sorrows to yourself and don't spatter and splash your neighbours with them, that's all you can do till by God's will they blunt down.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER I

ANOTHER winter came and I felt like an old horse, who's laboured for a good master so well as he was able and now, instead of ending his days in the knacker's yard, is turned out and granted sunshine and grass and water till his natural end. Very thankful I was for so many blessings, and tried to keep gratitude along with my other memories of the past. Bright flashes broke through the murk, and I can mind a nasty February day when I wandered in the churchyard—a day that might have cast down some folk but did me good. I'd go there now and again to tend my graves and look at others, because when you are as old as I was now and had known so many of the sleepers laid away there in more than fifty years, a walk like that refreshes your recollection. You call to mind all they felt to each other and how they loved and hated each other, how they quarrelled and made it up, or hated to the end, and you feel glad they are all equal and at peace now and no more back-biting and evil-speaking—all just calm and dignified, without an ache, or a sigh, or a thought of to-morrow to vex them. And then you feel there's a lot more to be said for being dead than folk are ready to grant; and you also take account of another thing: how little in the long run you miss most people when they drop out. They may have bulked fairly large when they were alive, but are less than your cabbage plot to you now. Few who were part of your life left scars upon it time cannot wash away and even those you hugged to your heart and bruised it when they died—even they can't break it after they are sped. The living break each other's hearts, not the dead. So there's no peace like a village churchyard for me and I find little to cast me down where I moon among the bygone people. There they harbour in their oak and elm—more peaceful than when they slept in their osier cradles while their mothers rocked them.

I found a man waiting for me at home when I got back to shut up my poultry. A short day and dusk came down with cloud and wind to drown it—a day that seemed thankful to be gone and make an end. Yet, before I met the man, my thoughts had taken a wider range than the churchyard boundaries, for I read the papers now far

oftener than of old, when Micah was my only newspaper. King George V had gone to his reward and all England shed tears for that great loss; while before another year was spent, there had come the amazing news that King Edward had willed to be our new king no more! He cast aside his crown for love and the nation was took aback, before such a tremendous event. No doubt it would have been too much of a break with our traditions for His Majesty to turn an American lady into Queen of England. There was another American lady who had become the first female member of our Parliament, and many thought that was a mistake; but all agreed an American queen was going too far. So love conquered the royal heart and his brother reigned in his stead. As for me, knowing so well what love is, I thought the prince had done dead right and I knew Micah must have thought the same. Then, coming home and finding Bob Mason waiting to see me, I felt small doubt what he was come for.

"When I've shut up my birds I'll make you a cup of tea, Bob," I said, and he thanked me gratefully.

"Nothing will give me greater pleasure than that," he answered.

"And how's the fishing?" I asked when we were settled down and the lamp lighted.

"Middling to good," he admitted. "We don't get the lobsters we used to get—growing scarcer in my opinion."

"Why should they, my dear man?" I inquired. "Learned men say a hen lobster lays round about a million eggs at a sitting, and if all came to perfection there wouldn't be any room in the ocean for anything but lobsters."

He didn't show any interest in the subject, however.

"I'll have my tea, Pete, and talk after," he said.

He was rather a handsome man and never one to mingle much with the people. A very good son to his mother till she died; and then folk thought he would look round for a wife and no difficulty in that respect; but Mrs. Mason was gone years now and he must have been a bit over fifty and growing grey. I'd known him all his life and, while he ate and drank, I kept a light, cheerful touch and told him how I could still remember when we were little children and how I'd blow his nose and tidy him in Sunday School. But he continued in rather a self-absorbed mood. Then he finished his tea, pulled himself together and set out.

"You've told me once and again in the past," he began, "how it would be better fit if I took a wife; but there was always a good answer to that, Pete."

"And what was that?" I asked.

"The answer was this: I never fell in love with a woman but once in all my life, and you were the woman. So seeing the only woman I could properly love wasn't in the market, I stopped single. I looked round about if I might find another a patch on you, but I never did, and I knew the gulf there was between me and such a man as Micah. But he was called away, and all things are possible and no man can ever be sure how he looks in the eyes of a fellow-creature. I considered how you had always treated me, as an old, trustable friend, and couldn't call home a single time when you gave me a hard word, and the thought cheered me and spurred me on for a bit. But then I remembered that was how you treated everybody else also. And that cast me down a bit again and I told myself I was a silly loon to imagine you could feel disposed after your experience of the married state, to heed anything I might have to say."

I couldn't but laugh at the poor chap.

"Good Powers, Bob!" I said. "You haven't waited all your manhood to fall for a back-number at your time of life?"

"You're not what can fairly be called a back-number, my dear woman," he replied. "Some I grant you—men as well as females—are back-numbers all their lives—born so and left at the post from childhood onwards. But not so with you. You've got what scores of young women lack: a brave outlook and a cheerful understanding of the male, which lots of very nice women never reach to. You're young still at heart—younger far than I am—so there's no disrespect for a man like me to offer for a woman like you. Because that's what I'm doing this instant moment. Yes I am, Pete. Despite all the arguments I've laid out against, still my turn of mind is such when I think of you that I brave the objections and tell you I'd dearly like to take you to wife. And you're the only woman I ever could take to wife in any case."

He handled the subject pretty well and I always knew, when the time came, he would put it in good language. The way he was used to tell his famous story of Ann and Felix, the smuggler, showed a command of words; so, before replying, I let my thoughts travel over our friendship while Robert Mason sat quite still and waited for me to speak. For a good minute if not more I forgot all about him and he grew weary and fearful and started again.

"Perhaps you are thinking, Pete, that I've offered too soon and should have waited for the full year after your frightful loss. And if you feel that, then God forgive me for daring to speak out of turn I'm sure; but you must make allowance for my feelings and be merciful on that point."

"No, no, no!" I answered him. "Don't heap any more ashes on

your head, my dear chap. Between old friends, like us no such thing is needful. Never a man could put his case better than you have I'm sure, and I'm very happy to think you hold such a good opinion of me that you could trust your happiness in my poor hands. But I can't pleasure you, Bob, feeling no mind to venture again. I've had a lot more than my share of good men and enjoyed married life far beyond my deserving, but—no more for me, Bob, though for your comfort, I'm sure no man would make a better husband than you would. And I hope you'll look round now in earnest and be rewarded according."

He was disappointed but not surprised.

"Because you've drawn two prizes, that's no reason why your third should be a blank," he said.

"Not for a moment," I agreed, "and I don't think marriage with you would be a blank. But enough is as good as a feast, Bob—especially such a proper feast as I have had—and another thing: whereas in the case of Appleby and Widecombe I felt confident from the first I should fill all their requirements, I don't feel like that in your case. I have a great friendship for you but I don't love you more than anybody else. Well disposed, yes, and anxious for your prosperity, yes; but no more."

"It might ripen into that," he ventured to say.

"No," I answered. "There's a lot of humbug talked about respect ripening into love and scores of poor girls have been pushed into marriage by that false promise. However, that doesn't concern us. At our ages real love is only a ghost in any case, and rather a silly ghost at that."

"I stand corrected then," he said again. He was too fond of this expression and, somehow, I never found myself very full of admiration for any man who is quick to admit it. He didn't argue any more and I was glad when he rose up and prepared to go home.

"Well, good night, Mrs. Widecombe," he said.

"Good night, my dear, and God bless you," I answered.

"God help me," he replied and plunged off into the dark.

I felt regretful for him and could only hope the good, lone fellow might yet find the right one. In fact I went so far as to turn over a few names. One if not two happy match-makings I could number; but also an ugly failure, where the wife held me in much discredit afterwards and never forgave me. I thought how Micah had warned me at the time I might be making a big mistake to bring unknown quantities together. He always proved right, but never said, "I told you so" afterwards. Too big a man for that.

There was another proposal for marriage looming up yet, for the

man destined to make it had not hidden his intentions so carefully as poor Bob and I wasn't the only one who knew his purpose. But before that happened there fell out the very curious case of Alfred Cobley and his daughter, Clara. Nothing to do with me this time, but it caused those who knew the inner workings a good deal of harmless amusement, all centred in the adventures of four folk well known to the parish. That was Mrs. Bascombe, an old friend of mine and something of a comfort after I lost Micah, because she had been a widow herself for two years and buried a good husband, so understood what I had been called to endure. And now Ann Bascombe was reported to have taken Farmer Cobley for her second—a widower of long standing and well-to-do. There were two opinions about him and I knew a good bit concerning his character, because his place, Cliff Farm, marched with the boundaries of Birch Hanger and the Blanchards had always known the Cobleys very well and neighboured with them friendly enough. Alfred Cobley knew how to make Cliff pay. At thirty, he married a pretty woman with money, and he used her dowry to buy another twenty-five acres that wanted patience and cash to better it. But where his interests were concerned, Cobley never lacked for patience nor stinted money. One daughter they had and no more and now her mother was dead and Clara twenty-two years of age. Her father's right hand and the girl lived for him alone. She proved to have his good business brain, but none of his charm of manner, or nice speech, or great bargaining powers. It was just the high-water mark of selfishness that sped Cobley on his victorious way and many a man found himself lost before he knew it when doing business with him. He might have been useful at Beesworthy, where we didn't boast more brains than we needed; but he always swore he lacked the gifts to go on committees though he applauded such as served and gave up a bit of their time free of cost and did a bit of work gratis out of their public spirit. For praising other people there was never Cobley's equal, and praise, though cheap, is always welcome. He had a great art to be generous with what cost him nothing, but his sole real interests were all inside his boundaries. Clara he had trained to be exactly what he wished her, and she, for her part, made her father her god and grew up in admiration and worship for him and his opinions. As for boys of her own age, to her thay were no better than birds in the hedge. That was what Alfred wished, for he never meant to lose her and felt at no time fearful that he ever would. I always say it isn't the features of a face that matter, but the expression upon them, and the queer thing about Clara seemed to me that she had no expression at all. Her features were poor, but there was no atoning expression—just a

human countenance with no more to it than you get on a turnip. Only by her works was it possible to judge Clara—a pale, small-eyed young woman with a fine strong body and a passion for hard labour. Wrapped up in her parent and him alone, and all we knew about her was that some day she was going to have Cliff Farm and be worth a lot of money.

That was three of the four people concerned and the fourth—so I learned from Ann Bascombe—turned out to be Neddy Ball, generally called "the busy man of Beesworthy."

Ned was a bachelor round about forty and all men spoke a good word for him. He had a yellow-whiskered, blue-eyed face and a stout body, although how such an active man could put on flesh was a mystery. He was huckster to half a dozen farms for Kingsbridge market; he kept bees and ran a vegetable garden an acre large; he served on the Parish Council and was people's Warden. Numberless other small chores with a pinch of money he also accomplished and never failed of one. Punctual as the clock and trustable as the seasons. And then, in his early forties, he woke up to the fact a wife might be worked into his life with great advantage and only regretted the needful time to find and court the woman. An old maiden aunt kept his house for him and, but for Miss Ball's tiresome temper and many ailments, he would have been content to carry on single-handed for ever.

These were the two men and two women involved when Ann Bascombe invited herself to tea and threw light on the pattern they were weaving.

She began with a question.

"What is your private opinion of Farmer Cobley, Pete?" she asked.

"It runs on a line with the general opinion," I told her. "We all agree he's a well set up man, with great charm of manner and always willing to be friends with folk. The Sergeant was naming him but a day or two ago. Winter's a fine judge of character and says you must grant Alfred is an own-self man, who puts his advantages above all else."

"I've seen a bit of him lately, for this reason," explained Mrs. Bascombe. "As you know now I help myself a good deal with my needle, Pete."

"Who does not?" I asked. "You are famous for your needle, Ann."

"Well, Clara Cobley is not," she went on. "A rare worker out of doors and does a man's work, but no needle-woman; so a month ago, she came to see me and said there was a rare lot of toil calling to be done over the linen at Cliff and her father had called her

attention to it, being very nice in such matters. So she came to know if I could put in a week's sewing up there and take dinner with them and devote myself to the linen and decree what could be saved. She offered good money and I agreed and went up daily for nine days and made a tidy job of it."

"I'm very sure of that," I said.

"So I came to know Clara's father pretty well and found him a nice, gracious man, and disposed from the first to be on friendly terms. He got into a habit of dropping in upon me in my workroom, when his daughter was out of the way, and he liked me to stop to tea. And if a close man such as Alf offers you a meal over and above the wages ordained, then you wonder."

"He knows a handsome woman if he sees one," I said, "and nobody can be better company than you, Ann, when you mind to be."

"Or him," she answered. "He's a taking sort of chap because choice in his speech and never coarse nor forward. We got on well together and he praised my work and said I was saving him money and confessed that was a good deed that always went to his heart. He praised Clara too for the same reason and said that no father ever had a better daughter. But, behind all this, I felt he was sizing me up, because a man like him wouldn't waste his time chattering to a woman without some reason."

Ann was a very fine creature still. Not a grey hair on her head and scarce a wrinkle on her brow. Large brown eyes and a happy fashion of mouth. Just the sort to catch the fancy of any man over forty years old.

"You're right," I assured the widow, "for never would he have spent five minutes twittering with you, my dear, after he had once assured himself you were earning your money. Never would Alf have done such a thing if thoughts were not moving in his mind. And why not? You're a most personable piece and don't look your years or show your bereavements."

"You took a second come to that, Pete, and never was such a triumphant success," she said.

"I did and was greatly blessed as all the world knows," I answered, "but I wouldn't put Cobley in the same rank as Micah: I warn you of that. Alfred may be a prize for the right woman and you may be the woman; and if you feel he pleases you and looks to be much about what you could do with, then I don't see any reason why you shouldn't be happy at Cliff Farm. But look all round it."

"I'm one who would feel the happier for the support of a strong man," admitted Ann, "and I should be a lot fortified to have a partner like him."

"There's Clara," I said. "Ruling over the farm as she does, she may little like the thought."

My visitor nodded at that.

"She does rule and her word goes," she admitted. "And what really threw the first light on Cobley's attentions was that he always took mighty good care, when Clara happened to be there, never to show any. At meals he was just polite and no more. Only behind her back he became confidential, and she don't know what time he spent in my company when she was out of the way."

"Then he feels that's where the shoe is going to pinch," I said. "and he won't want to pinch her—you can be sure of that. But if he's in love with you, that's a master passion and a barrow-load of daughters won't bawk him of you, Ann, if you decide to go to him. He'll lay his plans to keep you both and trust his powers and cleverness to do so. He well knows you couldn't be a patch on Clara from a business point of view, so it will be her for business and you for pleasure."

"That's true," she agreed. "I should be very put about to live with a step-daughter who regarded me as an enemy to her."

"Let Nature take its course," I advised. "You'll have Alf on your side from the first when you take him and he ought to manage Clara if anybody can. She may welcome you as a good addition to Cliff after she finds you are all for being her friend. She hasn't got many."

"I'll mark time and wait for him to take the next step, and then I'll think it over," promised Mrs. Bascombe.

"You won't have to wait long," I foretold. "If he's decided he wants you, he'll get on with it pretty quick be sure."

"You shall be first to hear," answered Ann, "and thank you for your tea, my dear."

Then she went off and that is what Janice would have called Act I of Ann's adventure, but Act II followed very soon afterwards. She wasn't in it herself and I saw no more of her until Act III. I had another visitor in the shape of Neddy Ball, our busy man, and he often came for a pinch of advice in confidence. He was one of our old friends, too, and among those who had thought a lot of my husband, for as yet time hadn't travelled so far I owned any friends that had not also been Micah's friends. After a great loss like mine you never want any more friends at all, at first, because you feel there's only half of yourself left, and who wants to make friends with half a woman and all her best in the grave?

Ball unfolded some remarkable ideas as to his own intentions.

"My mind's as active as my body, Pete," he told me, "and never

more so than at present; but sometimes your mind runs you on to dangerous ground where your instincts hesitate to follow. And I've caught my mind playing with the thought of matrimony these days, and nobody more surprised than me to do so."

"If you can find time for a wife, why not?" I inquired. "But what would Miss Ball say?"

"A natural question," he granted, "yet, in a manner of speaking, it was Aunt Jenifer who started the thought. I imagined, like everybody else, that I was her morning star and the apple of her eye and so on and have always put up with the difficulties and problems and doctor's bills that go with Aunt Jenifer. But not so long ago she made a remark that knocked the stuffing out of all that and delighted me with a glimpse of liberty and freedom. For some time now it seems I haven't been the apple of her eye by any means, but only her duty to keep my house for me and toil on over me and see to all my manifold requirements. In fact she tells me if I wasn't here demanding her thought from dawn to dusk, she would put in for one of the old almshouses and retire into peace and quiet and very likely lengthen her life in consequence. Then she told me that what I really wanted was a wife, who could stand up to me and give and take and answer back when called to do so. And then she wept and quieted down and begged me to forgive her and forget all about it. I forgave her but didn't forget all about it, Pete. In fact the idea gained ground and—strangest of all—I found, when I dwelt upon it, that a certain female figure rose in my mind."

I smiled at the man.

"The figure that rose in your mind, Neddy, wasn't a female, but the figure it will cost you to keep a wife," I said. "Wives run to more money than aunts, be it as it will."

"No," he answered. "You get me wrong there. It wasn't the upkeep I figured, but the woman herself!"

"You are pushing along!" I said. "Who ever would have thought you'd pounced so quick as all that!"

"I'll be honest with you," he assured me, "because you wouldn't put yourself about to aid anybody you thought was playing a double part, and it would be foreign to my nature to do so. If I once started to be devious, the whole scheme of my activities would come to the ground. So I confess that I never felt to be in love with anything but hard work and I don't know more about love than one of my working bees. But, just for that reason, a certain figure has risen in my mind—a woman a good few years younger than me, yet, like myself, never troubled by any tender affections and never likely to be.

She wouldn't want any fireworks of that sort, but she might by good chance regard me as a sound speculation."

"Do you know her proper, Ned?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I know her and she knows me and so does her father," he answered. "I've worked for him a good few years and command his trust and respect, but it might happen he wouldn't favour me, because the maiden rules the roast at Cliff Farm and Cobley may well consider himself a lost man without her and forbid it. That wouldn't matter if we reached to a pitch where Clara put me above him, because she's got a strong will and was born to command; but if he thought well of it——"

"He wouldn't Ned," I interrupted. "You can take that for a certainty to start upon. Nothing would suit Alf less than losing Clara; but against that, if she liked the thought of being a married woman, then, as you say, she might go to you. Your only chance would lie there. Clara may be too much of a bleak neuter to do more than doubt your motives and give you a frosty answer; but if there was something in you to awake a spark of pride to think you reckoned her worth while, she might agree. Only walk cautious, Ned, and don't do anything to lose their custom."

"She's got her points," he assured me. "Very good at figures, though lacking much of a figure herself."

Then he laughed and off he went.

"I thought a good deal over this news after Ball had gone and considered whether anybody was going to be pleased, or the reverse; then, chancing a day or two later to fall in with Alfred Cobley on my way to Birch Hanger, we fell into talk and I tried a feeler and praised Clara and said he would have to face a tidy big loss in that quarter some day.

"Such a grand girl will be snatched away by some lucky chap before long," I prophesied to him, "so you must count to lose her soon or late."

But Alf would have none of that.

"Lose her? Lose Clara! Whatever will you think of next, I wonder?" he exclaimed. "Only her father will ever know her worth, and only Clara know my worth for that matter. She's mine down to her boots and while I'm above ground, the bare thought of marriage would be poison to the girl. Not that I should ever come between her and happiness, but I'm her happiness and she would be lost without me."

"No love to spare for anyone else you'd say?"

"Not she!"

I guessed he was probably right and believed that Neddy Ball

must soon find it was so; and a few days later Ann Bascombe sent me a little letter by a boy asking me to come to tea and saying things had advanced a lot since last she saw me. So I went and, after we had said spring was in the air and the days were lengthening out and so on, she poured tea and came to her information.

"You might say I was bursting with intelligence for your ear only," began Ann, "and every word I tell must be kept a dead secret for the present, Pete, because so he ordains. But I've took him! I've took Cobley and I must say I feel very hopeful for the most part. He's a fine man and full of affection to me and I shall get to like him better and better, or so I hope. He put it in most gentlemanly language and you felt from the first he wasn't the sort could be asked to take 'no' for an answer. And when I said 'yes,' he swore he was a blessed man and gathered me up in his arms and kissed me on the lips before I knew where I stood!"

"Must have woke echoes of your first love, Ann," I said.

"He's young for his years and full of beans yet," she answered. "But that isn't all. After he'd said it was the day of his life he told me something I didn't like so well. He broke it to me that as yet Clara knew nothing about what he had long hoped to do and now accomplished. 'Clara,' he said, 'is quite ignorant of what has happened to-day, Ann.' Just a man's blindness that was, because Clara knows exceedingly well what he's been up to and, last time I met her in the street, I could see in a flash her opinions of me had changed a lot since I worked at Cliff. She knows and she hates it. Mark my words, Pete, Alfred is frightened of Clara!"

"Not frightened," I told her. "Alf isn't frightened, but he knows her well enough to understand she won't like him marrying again, because that means she's got to take second place at Cliff."

"He was frightened," persisted Ann, "for a reason I'll divulge later. He began upon his devotion to Clara, though he started off by saying I always would be the sun to her moon. But he wants everything to go comfortable, and so he dwelt on his future intentions that I might agree with them before he tells her what he's done. Clara's vital to him and he's confident that, when I know her better, I shall feel the same. Which I hope is true. Then he told me just what he's going to tell her if I agree and see no reason against, 'The pair of you will most likely outlive me,' he said, 'and my present intentions, when I make a new will, are to leave the farm to Clara, seeing she'd be a lost woman anywhere else, and divide my money, fifty-fifty between you and her. But the condition I make is this: that you will be at liberty to stop at Cliff and enjoy all the comforts and privileges of Cliff as long as you live. There must be no question

as to that. You and she will be my right hand and my left hand, and if you agree to join hands when I'm dead, so much the better, but if otherwise and you find you can't stand the farm after I'm taken, then half my money is yours to go on with your life some place else.' "

"That sounds a pretty fair deal, Ann," I said. "And what did you respond to his plans, my dear?"

"I accepted them," replied Ann. "He wouldn't have told me the farm wasn't going to be my farm if he had not been honest. He'd have left me to find it out after he was dead. I don't want property in any case and, seeing we are near of an age he's just as likely to outlive me as not. But now about him being feared of Clara. He didn't admit it of course, but after hearing I saw eye to eye with his arrangements, he let the cat out of the bag. He was very pleased and he said. 'That being so, Ann, you come to tea at Cliff on Sunday, and when it's over, I'll break our glad news to my daughter with you to support me!' "

I nodded.

"I see your point," I told her. "Alf wouldn't have wanted any support if he wasn't aware of a lion in his path, Ann. And he reckons, with you on the spot when Clara hears the news, he'll come out of it better than if he was single-handed. He's perfectly aware what his child's going to think about this and he knows that if you are there beaming in her face at the time, then Clara's tongue will have to be curbed."

"That no doubt is what he hopes for and he may be right," she said.

"She may cut up rough for the minute, but it won't last," I promised. "She'll have two to one against her and very like, when she hears the farm is going to be hers, she may welcome you more friendly than you think, or Cobley expects."

"I shall be glad when Sunday's over and I've took tea up there and heard the worst," confessed Ann.

"There may have been a touch of fear in Alfred's mind as you say, but he's acting very wisely, which he can always be trusted to do," I said.

I didn't see her again till Tuesday, being much occupied with a call from Birch Hanger at the moment. But on Tuesday I went to Ann's home and heard more and found that she had been a good bit upset on Sunday and yet again on Monday.

Meanwhile, however, I got further news from another source, because Neddy Ball was a link in the chain and it so happened he looked in upon me during Sunday evening and stopped and ate some supper and told me interesting things. He knew Ann well and I felt

very much surprised at first to hear he was also in her confidence touching Mr. Cobley, for she had impressed upon me it was a dead secret; but she had told him that Alfred was after her long ago.

Ball began on this subject and said that, for his part, he didn't think she'd act very cleverly to accept the farmer, being a gentle and kindly soul and not the sort ever to hold her own with Cobley. In fact he hoped it wouldn't happen and then he went on to his own affairs and confessed how as yet he couldn't report a lot of progress.

"In a way," said Ned, "you might reckon I had come at the accepted time for Clara, because, if all Ann tells is true then Clara will be dead sure to feel her nose out of joint at Cliff and find Providence has sent a way out. Her heart and soul were wrapped up in her father, but now, if she sees he is looking elsewhere for his future contentment, she will be properly lost. And then, with me suddenly coming along, she could join up with me and save her face and leave the coast clear for Mrs. Bascombe."

"That looks sound reasoning," I said. "Have you gone so far as to let Clara know your feelings?"

"I've tried," he answered, "but the going isn't too good. She knows because she can't help knowing; but I haven't got a very light touch and she don't help. She'll let me talk and pass a pleasantry now and again, but it's out of my line and I don't interest her. Maybe the difference in age accounts for it. There's a longful gap between twenty-two and forty-two."

"Offer to take her for a bit of pleasuring—to Kingsbridge or somewhere in your motor-car," I advised him. "It might throw a bit of light if she consented and show her you were in earnest. She may think you don't mean anything."

"I'm busy," he said, "and pleasuring is a good bit out of my line, same as it is out of hers. But I could suggest it and fit it in with some of my engagements if she agreed. If Ann Bascombe is really going to take her father, then Clara might open out a bit and feel disposed to lend a helping hand when we meet. I haven't given her any reason yet to nip me in the bud; but I feel I've a lot too much to do and think about to mess about after her indefinite."

"It will all come to a head when Mrs. Bascombe takes her father," I told him, and he hoped it might.

I wondered if he'd said anything about his operations on Clara to Ann and soon after that Ann herself brought her last adventures to me.

"Things at Cliff fell out contrary to what Alf and I hoped after tea on Sunday," she told me. "Clara didn't respond to my arrival with any warmth, but nothing happened till we'd finished our meal

and Cobley announced he was going to marry me. 'I've got glad news for you, Clara,' he began and went on to say it was a cheerless life for her at Cliff, to live all alone without another woman to share the burden and heat of the day. 'So,' he said, '—for your sake quite as much as my own—I've ordained to wed and had the pride and good fortune to win Mrs. Bascombe. Not until I heard you praise her wondrous skill with her needle when she was up here,' he went on, 'did I allow my thoughts to dwell upon her, Clara, but then, after I got better acquaint, I found she was all you said and much more also. Yes, Clara, longing for a woman to lighten your toil, I offered and found myself accepted; and I thank God for it. And us three working together, will bring a lot of increased happiness into our united lives. A very great advancement for Cliff in my judgment, and I will the advantage shall be first to you, my love, and next to Ann.' That's how he flowed on, Pete, with his fine choice of words and cleverness, and I sat and nodded and smiled my best smiles at Clara all the while."

"I can hear him," I replied. "How did she take it?"

"She was a creepy sight," answered Ann. "She listened with her little, ugly eyes on his face and her jaw dropped as if she'd been struck dead. Presently she flushed up scarlet, then faded out again. He guessed she'd make a rare upstore about it, but he was all for a short battle and meant to go to bed a conqueror. He didn't do so, however, because though Clara hasn't got his command of language, she has got his brain power and, loathe her as I do, I couldn't but admire her line of action."

"It was a cruel moment for her no doubt," I agreed.

"Yes, it was, and, with her whole future overturned, she well knew she would never be able to put up a fight, nor hold her own that night. In fact she knew you can't do yourself justice after you've just been knocked all ends up by a thunder-bolt."

"She couldn t remain dumb however," I said, "unless she bolted out of his sight without a word."

"That's pretty much what she did do. She kept her nerve and shut her mouth and got up to go. 'Good night, Father,' she said. 'We'll talk about it on Monday if you please.' Then she was gone and went straight to her chamber, so he told me afterwards."

"You can't but admire a retreat like that, to gather her forces about her before she goes to battle," I admitted, and Ann agreed it was a good stratagem.

"Yes, Alf felt rather taken aback, but not surprised. 'She's saving her powers for to-mórrow,' I told him and he agreed. Then he saw me home. 'I must let her feel a bit of the steel hand in the

velvet glove I'm fearing,' he said. 'Fear nothing, Ann: I know how to proceed.' All the same I didn't like it very much, Pete, and I liked it still less when he came the following night after his battle with her had taken place. While he was seeing me home, he found Clara had come down again, and helped the hand-maid to clear the tea and lay supper; but, by the time he was back, she had retired to bed and he saw no more of her till next morning. She woke refreshed and, after breakfast, when the house-place was empty but for themselves, Alf found it was his turn to spar a bit for wind."

"I'm cruel sorry for you, Ann—a peace-lover like you—to be called to hear such painful things," I assured her.

"I'm sorry for myself also," she agreed, "and for the moment, so is Alfred. The girl began, so he told me, and opened the encounter just as he was preparing to start. ''Tis in a nutshell' said Clara, 'all my life long I've put you before everything, Father, and I was minded so to continue. I've been all a daughter ever was to a father and you have stood to me for my waking and sleeping thought ever since I could think at all. And now you're wishful for me to sing small and see another take my place. That's your look-out and if you have determined that Ann Bascombe will be more useful to you than me, then take her. But I'll say here and now, please, that if you marry after all these years, I shall leave Cliff that instant moment, because I couldn't endure for another woman to rule over me and be closer to you and more to you than I am. Never, never could I endure it and I hope that's clear.' So she spoke to her father, Pete, and he went on to tell me what he said to her. He took his pipe off the mantelshelf and lighted up and told her she had spoken as clear as could be. 'Like your fine affection to feel that way, my treasure,' he answered her and went on to say he could no more see Cliff without her than he could see himself without her. Very calm and cool was Alf so far. 'But the affection I feel for Mrs. Bascombe,' he want on, 'is on a different footing altogether, Clara. Love of a wife and love of a daughter don't clash at all. Fifty wives couldn't cast a shadow on my devotion to you and Ann rejoices in you already and wants to pleasure you just as much as she hopes to pleasure me.' He talked on with all his powers at work and poured common sense into the girl; but he says she listened like an image and her face didn't show one spark of anything: just as if it was a lump of mud. He failed to move her an inch and, finding he made no progress, turned on a pathetic note, which he also has at his command for the right occasions. He put down his pipe and sighed, blew his nose once or twice and tried to reach some soft spot in her body by reminding her of all the good money he'd spent upon

her. And then, finding these little touches no use, he ventured to ask her what her future ideas might be if such a fearful thing was thinkable that she left her life-long home. 'God, He knows,' said Alfred, 'that I never dreamed to be up against a horror like this, Clara, or called to choose between a wife and an only child—the glory of my existence. But since you can actually dream to do such a godless deed, may I ask, my treasure, what your plans might be if you did it?' She wasted no time as to that. 'If your love for me ain't strong enough to make you conquer your yearning for this widow woman, Father, then I'll sling my hook, because my love for you might go down in that case before my feelings for some other man. If I felt I wasn't the queen of your home any more, I might turn my attention to being the queen of another.' That's what she said without a blush, and Alf confessed he found it hard to believe he was hearing the girl aright. But I could see he was getting a bit hot by now himself."

"Yes," I told Ann. "Nothing makes some people hotter than to find their enemy keep cool."

"Alf told her that he felt much interest in her answer," went on Ann. "He was sure a dozen men would thank their stars for such a wife; but, owing to the hardness of the times, feared few would venture into marriage unless the woman could promise something else beside herself. Clara smiled at that. She said, 'I thought you'd remind me I was a pauper if so you willed, Father; but no call to go into figures, because everybody knows, if I went away from you, there won't be no fatherly blessings along with me. He wouldn't be like to want me for my prospects but only for myself.' 'And who might be he, I wonder?' Alfred asked her, and when she declined to put a name to him, her father felt Clara was bluffing. He spoke no further as to that, but changed the subject and made a new proposition. 'We'll let a month pass,' he said. 'We'll suffer a full month to go by and get this sad situation clear in our minds. Naught that can happen must ever come between you and me, my girl.' She answered that would suit her very well and turned soft for a passing moment and put her arms round him and kissed his ear. That's the story Alf told me, Pete, so you may say the matter's going to be dead for a month."

"And does that suit you, too, Ann?" I asked her.

"Not too well," she admitted. "If he loves me as he says, then I don't exactly see why he wants to wait on Clara for a month. No doubt her talk about another man was bluff."

I itched to tell her about Neddy Ball, but couldn't do that, though I felt it was time I did. So after she had gone, I pieced the

tale together and resolved to go a step further with Ned. However, it was he who went a step further with me and came to see me once again. He was in a mixed mood of doubt and triumph and told me how, in certain directions, good progress with Clara might be reported, but a mysterious side to her growing attentions puzzled him.

"She is certainly more to be approached," he said, "—so much so that I did suggest a motor ride and a cup of tea anywhere she might fancy to travel; but she wouldn't commit herself so far as that. In the main, however, she's more friendly and patient. She'll let me talk when I go for the market produce and there's a different look in her eyes."

"She knows you want her by now, Ned?" I asked.

"Yes, she knows that. I'd say she was figuring me up but can't decide. Her eyes look as if she was making calculations. There's a lot more to tell. I've gone farther yet with her, because I drove her into market with me last Friday and tried a feeler. It came in my mind like a flame of fire to offer without any more stratagems and I told her plump out I was ready and wishful to marry her."

"Good!" I said. "Because she must have answered 'yes' or 'no.' Many girls would have left it an open question, but not a downright one like Clara."

"She did by this hand, Pete! I couldn't see why she wanted to leave it an open question myself. I told her that now it was noised abroad her father was going to marry again, it looked to fit in very well." She eyed me for half a minute without a word and you couldn't but feel she was thinking like hell. And then she said that marriage was known to be successful now and again, and then she asked for time to turn over the idea. It pleased her to find she was wanted, but there's a lot who wouldn't marry for a fortune, yet feel a good bit uplifted to know they might."

"Have you seen her since?" I asked.

"Only for a minute by chance yesterday. We passed the time o day and she said she would give me my answer in a month's time, but not a sign as to what it's likely to be."

So there it was—all plain as a pikestaff and Clara just hanging Ned in her larder for the present till she found how the cat jumped at home. I laughed all night after to think of Clara with a man in her larder. Then I gave Ball a piece of advice and said something he didn't expect to hear but I felt to be wise. Not the whole truth, because if there's one thing a man hates it is to find a woman's keeping him in cold storage for her own convenience, but I advised him.

"If you do what I think you ought to do, you'll tell Ann Bascombe

this story," I said. "She thinks very well of you, and it's any odds she might have a clever word for you. We all know Clara to be difficult, and no doubt Ann has found that out for herself by now; but seeing you are in sight of winning the girl, Ann might help. Cobley on the contrary would hinder you because Clara's the lynch-pin of Cliff, which he well knows. So, if you and Ann pool your wits, you may help each other."

That was cautious and giving away nothing not generally known by now, and Neddy approved of the idea and agreed to see Mrs. Bascombe, give her his confidence and get her views on his intended.

When I came to tell Janice about the four of them long after, she said that was the end of the Second Act and left the third nice and doubtful.

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING happened to me round about now that made me forget all about the affairs at Cliff Farm for the minute. In fact two things fell out which had nothing to do with Cobley and his daughter, or the huckster, or widow Bascombe; but I can wind up their adventures first and the unexpected events that finished them off. To begin with Neddy kept his word and went to see Ann and reveal how he was situate with Clara and hope that it might add to her comfort if he took her away from her father. He trusted that Ann did not feel otherwise, or want the girl to stop; and then Alf's future bride found herself a lot interested and made her own feelings clear as to Clara. It was Ann herself came to see me on a Sunday evening some weeks later and bring her affairs back to my mind.

"I've seen a good deal of Ned Ball lately," she began, "and heard some interesting secrets. He told me a very queer item indeed, Pete: that he was three-parts contracted to Clara Cobley and only waiting her word. But she won't speak it and won't let him name it as yet to her father. Ball thought I might be pleased for him to take her out of Cliff before I go there, but my feeling was one of regret for Ned himself, because he little knows the tartar hid in Clara. Love can't have blinded him with a girl like her and he admits it, but he thinks, being such a towser for hard work as she is, that they might go well together. But, when I sounded Cobley as to whether his daughter had calmed down about me, he put me off. He is dead sure she'll see sense and says her talk about a man after her is all rubbish. He doesn't dream that Ned really wants her and I was

under a faithful promise not to tell him, but my feeling continues to be regret for Ball, because he's a human man and a lot too good for Clara."

Ann crooned on chiefly about the huckster and I had time for my own reflections while she did so.

"It's like this and we must get a bird's-eye view," I said when she stopped talking. "Alf doesn't want his girl to leave Cliff and she doesn't want you to go there. He's set on you both, but she can't stand for that, so if he marries you, she will consent to take Neddy, but not otherwise."

"That ain't love, however," said Ann.

"No," I agreed. "She won't go to Ball for love. She belongs to the order of women that don't fall in love, but she's using Ned as a secret weapon against her father. Next thing will be to bring Ball on the scene and show her father what she's going to do if he drives her to it."

"She's sitting on the fence and trying to see if she can't shake Cobley off me!" exclaimed Ann with horror.

"Certainly she is," I assured her. "You can see the bargain Clara's wishful to make. If she prevails upon Alf to turn you down, then she'll turn Ned down."

"The indecency!" cried Ann.

"Indecent but comical looked at from the outside," I suggested.

"I know one thing," she answered. "For a self-respecting man like Ball to be taken as a last resort by a woman like Clara, wouldn't amuse him very much if he got to hear of it."

"He mustn't get to hear of it, of course," I agreed.

"Why, he'd burst with indignation, Pete, and every right to before such a shameful thing," declared Mrs. Bascombe. "There's a lot in Ned not generally known, because nothing's ever happened to draw it out, but Clara would freeze all his fine instincts to the bone. She's too young for one thing and there's a thousand other reasons against her besides that."

"Then he must take a higher hand," I said, "and front Clara's father with his intentions to begin with. That will clear the air. There's nothing like secrecy to make the air foul."

"It ain't love, anyway," repeated Ann.

"Alf's nearer fifty than forty and, at that age, a man like him can't love another creature better than himself. You must face up to that whatever he may have said to the contrary."

So I told her and we parted soon afterwards; while that very night there came the great thought that made me take a hand in the affair. It was Ann, of course, that led me to do such a thing

egardless of risk, for, while she had chattered on and hardly realised he sensible words I tried to say in return, she had told me something of real importance. And upon that I made my resolve and sent for Neddy Ball and laid my cards on the table and told him in plain anguage where he stood and how to escape a nasty pitfall if he was nan enough to do it. I put a tidy strain on the huckster without a loubt, but my suggestions made a tremendous appeal to him: they icted like a tonic while he sat in dead silence for five minutes after nearing them. I passed the time by fetching him a drink of spirits, or our talk took place late one night in my own house. He thanked me and drank a stiff tot and then began by praising me in his generous fashion.

"No need for any words like that," I said. "But if I hadn't felt confidence in your reasoning powers I wouldn't have laid the idea before you. I can't pretend to know what your own opinions may be in that quarter, but this I will say. There might be a pleasant surprise awaiting you—a pleasanter one than your modesty would suggest."

"Looked at as a proposition, I never heard a better," he confessed. "It didn't enter into my wildest thoughts and still appears a lot too good to be likely. It's a gamble, but I never was one to fear reasonable risks. If it succeeded, then well and good, but the point for me would be to see exactly where I stood if it was to fail."

"Very true, Ned," I agreed. "You can get a line on that if you put down soundings first and see the depth where you are sailing. If the water looked too shallow for safety, you can alter your course and leave yourself as you were before."

We talked a bit longer and I knew before he left me that he was going to take the plunge. And I also knew I had put him into safe hands where, even if he lost the game, he wouldn't be subject to any ignominious treatment afterwards. I'd surprised him above a bit and now he was going to surprise somebody else. Then I began to grow a thought anxious myself and, after letting a few days pass without any signal from the parties, I took Ann some nice eggs one morning and stopped on talking, to see if anything was on the move. It struck me from the first that she felt a good bit absent-minded and she didn't show any great gratitude for the eggs, but said Neddy Ball had brought her a dozen and a pound of butter the day before. Which gave me an opening and I praised Ned's bearing to his friends, then inquired if he was any forwarder with Clara Cobley.

"No," she said. "She stands him off and since she can't conclude, Ball's going to do so. He's changed his note a good bit of late and who shall blame him?"

"If he's brought it to you, who he always thought his most valued friend, Ann, then why doesn't he bring it before her father?" I asked.

"Because she won't let him open his mouth to Alfred. She's keeping him up her sleeve against her father, and I may tell you I begin to get a thought impatient with Cobley myself."

"Small wonder," I declared. "If it was any business of mine I'd be furious. Not a word against Alfred of course, still—like father, like daughter perhaps. You know best."

She gloomed a bit before she answered, so I spoke another cunning word or two.

"Such things throw their light on human nature," I told her, "and often a man, without knowing it, gives you a glimpse of his character you never got before. In my experience you may often get an eye-opener upon a person by comparing him with another person. If you happen to know the high qualities of one really fine man, then, when you compare him with another prone to provoke opinions, you better judge between them, speaking generally."

That was a piece of pure artfulness on my part, because Ann well knew there were two opinions touching Alfred, but only one in the matter of Ned.

She nodded and showed a mite of interest.

"I see what you mean," she answered. "Love don't blind a woman at my age."

"Not if she's known the real thing, like you and I have," I agreed. "Comparisons will rise and doubts along with them in a mind like yours."

Then I cleared out and left her worried and not herself by any means; which raised a hope in me. After that darkness fell on the scene except for one passing flash from Neddy Ball. I met him hurrying through the village and evidently fired by some secret excitement. He looked like a hound that had been hunting a hare and suddenly got on the scent of a stag. Full of energy; but he only declared things were fast coming to a climax, which I was sick of hearing. He also said he didn't know what would happen to all his business, because he found himself behindhand in every direction. And away he buzzed. But I kept off Ann, feeling I had gone as far as I dared about her. Then, after another week of suspense, the climax did come with a vengeance and the affair ended in a blaze.

I had just returned from Birch Hanger one evening in a grey mood looking back over the past, because my sister Phyllis promised to be the next to speed. She had been going back a longful time and her sickness followed close to the pattern of our father's, so I felt that pretty soon now I should be the last of the children of Moses and

Susan Blanchard left. But thus it was and Phyllis looked to be keeping to the allotted span and no more, for she was near her seventieth year.

Then, upon my reveries after nightfall, there came voices and I went out to find two persons waiting to be let in. There was Neddy and Ann Bascombe along with him, and the time half-past ten, if not later.

"What in the name of fortune are you two running about at this hour for?" I asked, and they tumbled in to say they couldn't let another moment of their lives go by without telling me.

"I was feared you'd have gone to bed," said Ann.

"It's past my hour," I answered, "but I fell to thinking—not on your affairs, my dears, but on my own, because Phyllis is going down the hill fast now."

They mourned to hear that, so I changed the subject, knew they were happy and said I was glad to see the contentment in their faces.

"You tell your tale first, Ned," said Ann, "and then I'll tell her mine, if I've got the face to do it."

So Ball plunged into his adventure which was much the longer of the two.

"It begins three days ago," he said, "to put all in order. Then, up at Cliff as usual for the produce and also wishful for speech with Clara, I asked if I should take her with me to Kingsbridge and made it clear I was in none too patient a mood. She only had half a dozen words with me, because her father was in earshot at the moment; but she said she couldn't come, but might have some good news for me later and bade me meet her half after seven o'clock two nights hence, at the stile of Cliff cornfield, as her father would be from home that evening. Well, I saw what was coming at last and where I stood. So I said I would be there and, if a fine evening, we'd walk along the cliff walk in the moonlight. A powerful deal had happened to me before that meeting, however, but it took place in due course and the moon shone and I was there to time. A very fine night in every way.

" 'I've got a slice of cheerful news for you, Clara,' I said in a joyous tone of voice, and she answered how she had a slice of cheerful news for me, but not in a joyous tone of voice at all—far from it. After that she ran on, because I said, 'Well, ladies first. What's your bright news?' 'My news is that father's told me his patience is exhausted and he's going to marry that blasted woman,' she answered. 'And that's that and I can go to the devil. So now I'm willing to reward your patience, and come to you so soon as you mind to.' "

"What a triumph for you, Ned!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he admitted, "but she'd missed the bus if you take my

meaning. After Clara said that, she stopped, to let me praise God and fall on her neck with thanksgiving; but all she got was blank silence and only the murmur of the sea under the cliffs. At last I spoke, 'What a world,' I said, and not another word! Only the moon shining and the sound of the sea. And then Clara began to get a bit hot naturally, and spoke rather sharply. 'You don't seem to have heard what I've just told you,' she snapped out. 'Yes,' I answered, 'I heard you, Clara, only too well. Last time I pressed you to decide, three weeks ago, you dared me to name the matter again till you did.' 'Well, now I do name it,' she said and I fenced a bit. 'Why now?' I asked and it was her turn to be quiet. She saw things had gone askew and her mind jumped to a conclusion, but it was the wrong one. 'This is my father's work.' she said. 'He's been plotting against me. You've changed your mind, Ball.' 'Minds have been changed,' I granted, 'but not only mine, Clara. This isn't your father's work; but I'm going to be frank and open as my manner is and, when he comes home to-night, Mr. Cobley will confirm everything I've got to tell you. There's only one person called to suffer to-night so far as I can see, and that's him. And even he may not suffer so much as you might think.' 'Try and speak plain,' she said and I went on. 'It's like this, my dear woman. Your father put Mrs. Bascombe before you and so you ordained to keep your threat and leave him. And now you come to me to help you keep your threat.' 'You didn't ought to put it like that,' she said."

"She knew of course she'd lost you now," I suggested.

"She knew, Pete. I told her it was all over and the past a sealed book," went on Neddy. "I said all that mattered was that the good grain had been sifted from the chaff. She made to turn her back then and leave me alone in the moonlight, but I told her there was a spicy bit yet to interest her if she'd spare me another two minutes. Then she replied that I was a dirty dog and needn't come for Cliff produce any more and she would find an honest huckster if there was such a thing. So I took command and bade her listen and not lose her self-respect. 'What has happened is this,' I said. 'Mrs. Bascombe and myself, always good friends in her husband's lifetime, found ourselves equally interested in your family and, owing to that common interest and talking over the situation so oft, we got equally interested in ourselves. Then you may say our eyes were opened and Nature took a hand and, in a word, Clara, I was astonished to discover I liked Ann Bascombe a darned sight better than ever I liked you at your best.' Her mouth fell open and the moon shone on her teeth, which were always her best points. For the first time I saw a ray of hope dawn on her hopeless countenance so I went on to my high-water

mark. 'And what's more than that,' I said, 'the cream of the milk is that Ann has discovered she likes me oceans deeper than ever she liked Mr. Cobley?' "

"Well done both of you!" I cried out. "What next, Ned?"

"I saw a miserable object transformed in one instant to a radiant and happy girl," he said. "Gone was her woe. 'My dear God!' she squeaked out, 'You blessed man! Oh, Ned, get her away from father and I'll love you in earnest to my dying day!' For half a moment in the dim moonlight, she looked quite personable. 'I have got her away, and Cobley's going to hear it to-night, my lass, so keep your rejoicings till he comes home,' I said. And if ever she felt disposed to kiss a man in her life, it was me at that moment! Away she tore like a hunting weasel and, for a light touch, I shouted after her that I should be at Cliff as usual on the usual day."

"You clever people!" I exclaimed.

"Now list to Ann," begged Neddy, "and she will tell you how it fell out at her end."

"So I will then," said Ann. "He came by his own appointment to-night and I had just what he liked ready for him. He began by expressing his regret for having given me a miss of late, because it was nine or ten days since he'd seen me. But I said I quite understood that affairs of the heart must take second place. He said he was now in a position to approach the future and welcome me to Cliff, where I'd find myself a jewel in its proper setting at last."

Neddy giggled and I bade him keep still.

"Let her run on," I said. "You've had your turn."

"Well, Alf began by saying he had cast out Clara once for all," continued Mrs. Bascombe. 'No woman ever had such a father as I have been to her,' he said, 'but she's come out in a very ugly light over this business and swears there's a man's quite ready and willing to marry her and give her house-room. If that's your last word,' he said to her, 'then hear mine, Clara. You know you are lying and no man to call himself a man, wants you, but you can pack your box and say good-bye to me and Cliff when you please to and get out of my sight for evermore.' That's how he's left it with Clara. She turned as white as a goose when she heard him and promised she'd be gone by dawn to-morrow. Then Alf praised himself for his patience and went on with his supper. So I took a long breath, Pete, and told him. I fastened on his last word and after a bit of a pause, dashed into it."

"What was his last word?" I asked her.

" 'Patience' was his last word, and when he'd drunk a glass of beer and poured out another, the time being near eight o'clock, I said I was very much afraid he'd have to put another call on his

patience yet. 'You see, Alfred,' I said, 'nothing stands still. Something is always getting a move on, and while your feelings were naturally turned against Clara for her undaughterly line of conduct, my feelings were upon the move likewise. You know your huckster, Mr. Edward Ball, don't you?' He stared and said everybody knew him and what had Ned got to do with it? 'Everything,' I answered. 'Everything, Alf, because his feelings sprang into action at the same time. He's a trusted friend of mine and I share the general opinion of his qualities—all good. Then, behind the scenes so to speak, he told me what he was wishful to tell you, but was prevented from so doing by Clara.' "

"Did he grasp what you were aiming at, Ann?" I begged to know.

"Not yet. I only confused him so far," she said, "and he asked me what I was trying to say. Then I told him how in sober truth, Ned had Clara in mind for his wife. 'Ball!' he said. 'Ball' to come between me and my idiot of a girl!' I explained that was how it stood and how, talking it over with me, Ned had seen the madness of such a resolve and admitted he was in the wrong. 'And more than that he found, Alfred,' I went on. 'He found I myself was just the pattern of partner he felt to crave for, and I've decided he was right, because Mr. Ball is more the sort to suit me in the long run and I should cut a properer figure under his roof than yours. I shouldn't disappoint him,' I said, 'but I'd be most sure to fail you.' Alf had been beaming till he heard the fatal words; then he beamed no more. For a moment he kept dumb, so I filled in the time by saying I felt positive he'd find Clara a more lasting consolation than ever I could have hoped to be."

"Good work, Ann!" I said.

"He cooled down before he spoke," she concluded. "Whatever his faults he has his self-command. He looked at me with a good deal of contempt in his expression, but didn't say what was doubtless on his tongue. No fuss and no uproar."

"He's not one to waste an ounce of energy on a lost cause," said Neddy.

"No," agreed Ann. "He isn't and he didn't. He only asked one question in quite a calm tone of voice. 'Are you dead sure of what you're saying, Ann?' he inquired and I answered that I was. He sniffed and said, more to himself than me, that it would be all the same a hundred years hence and I bowed my head and granted that he was right as usual and God knows best. 'So it's generally believed,' he answered, 'and nobody can prove it ain't true.' Then he rose up without another word and strode out of the house, leaving his last glass of beer undrunk."

"I'd give a week's money to hear what happened between him and his Clara when he got home," said Neddy Ball.

"I can tell you," I assured him. "It went like this I expect. He'll tell her he was always balanced between her and that changeable woman, but is thankful to say the matter has turned out in his favour. Then, like as not, he'll pass it off light and hope that Clara won't go courting again and reckon that he's not going to do so either. And she'll purr over him and say she hates every man on earth but him, and so on. And he'll tell her the incident is closed, which is a very favourite expression of Alf's when he doesn't want to go on with anything."

Next week Ball put up the banns, much to the excitement of the parish and a very good business they made of their married life.

As for Cliff, Clara got it safe fifteen years afterwards, when she closed her father's eyes, and she farms it yet, finding labour the only difficulty, because the rising generation of farm hands don't like a woman over them—anyway not such a woman as Clara Cobley.

All of no account now; but what did happen was my sister passing over and the sense of loss that Phyllis made at Birch Hanger. She was a link with the old dispensation and everybody missed her. Only three women were left at the farm that I cared about, or cared for me, and they were Grace, my brother Aaron's widow, and Prudence, Norton's wife, who reigned in her quiet way up there and was well liked by all of them, and Dolly Caunter, Luke Caunter's wife. The dairy-maid she became and Dolly's eldest daughter, Mary, was my serving maid at that time and so remained for a good few years—a simple girl with her father's eyes—trustable and handy.

It was after Phyllis died that I saw a bit more of Janice, who came to the funeral and stopped with me for a few days. She had liked Phyllis, too, and was sad for me to lose her. Time began to make its mark on my treasure and I found myself losing hope of a husband for her; but she never changed in her love for her business and said how she was considering a suggestion to play a part in a talking picture. I stopped with her for a day or two a little later in her own house and she made me go with her to hear and see a talking picture showing at Dartmouth, and very remarkable it looked and sounded to be. They were folk outside my experience, being American, and the scenery was American, of course, and it was a vulgar tale in places, but Janice said if she went into a picture it would be all English with a sad ending and scenery in Cornwall, and no vulgarity. In the upshot she consented to do so and I had a queer feeling how her performance would be recorded in such a

way as to make her left on earth for another generation to see and hear after she was gone herself.

Another adventure lay before her, because she was joining the company of a famous actor next year and going upon a tour in the United States, and the thought of that gave her great pleasure. So she went on with her full life but never bated in her affection for me and I never lost the feeling she was the crowning masterpiece of my days and first in my interests since Micah had gone. She knew all my men friends but best liked John Winter and found him to be a very interesting and attractive man as I myself had found him. And in her company John showed his cleverness too, because he had seen her act before he came to Beesworthy and felt it a great compliment to meet her at first hand.

But it was Charlie Dickson now who asked for my attention as I knew only too well he intended—one of those awkward situations for a woman when she wants to get a sad scene over, yet is called to wait in discomfort for a man to speak first. It would have surprised Charlie a lot if he had dreamed I knew a thing about his purpose, for, when he came to it, he began by telling me to hold on to myself like grim death because he was going to give me the astonishment of my life. But somebody else had known what was coming besides myself, for an eye not easy to hoodwink was aware of Dickson's attentions and took upon myself to touch the subject. Such a thing would have been an impertinence in anybody else, but not in the quarter from which it came, which was Sergeant Winter. He would drop in pretty frequent to pass the time of day and look at my birds, or bring me a bunch of flowers sometimes from the Manor Gardens, where he often spent an hour or two with Hope, the head man. And, after scanning my pheasants one afternoon and admiring a grand golden cock in full plumage, he said:

"That bird reminds me of Charlie Dickson, Pete—not in appearance because there's no human being so beautiful as a cock pheasant, but in the way he walks."

"It's only a habit," I answered. "Charlie's not a vain man really and would be hurt if you thought he was. He's divulged a kind heart to me and spoke with nice feeling of his wife, who died before he came here."

"I've nothing against him and he's no business of mine," admitted the old soldier, "and I'm not jealous you understand, because jealousy is a fool's game in any case. No, not jealous, but anxious."

I was surprised at the sergeant.

"Why did you feel any cause to be anxious, John?" I asked. "As you truly say Charlie's no business of yours."

"I'm anxious because it reveals a bit of Dickson's character you wouldn't expect," he replied. "Only, as an old and trusty friend, Pete, I do feel justified to drop a word in your ear. From more than one quarter I have heard it whispered you are going to marry Dickson and I asked myself who started that. There are ears behind every hedge in Beesworthy as we all know, but people don't invent news, and I was dead sure you hadn't told such information to anybody. Which leaves only the publican himself."

"A publican he may be but a sinner no," I said, "and not a liar to my knowledge, John."

"Never a straighter man I'd say," he agreed, "but nevertheless who but Charles could have launched that rumour? And, two serious faults are up against him if he did."

"What are they?" I asked.

"Firstly that he vaunted himself and dared to name a name, sacred to all who ever knew you and Micah, before he had a right to do so, and secondly, if true, that he approached you three months too soon after your great loss. No seemly man offers marriage to a relict before twelve whole months are told," declared the sergeant very gravely.

So there I found myself in the twinkling of an eye with yet another man that wanted me! And me in sight of being an old woman now and often feeling I was one. John Winter had said it was no business of his, but he was the last on earth to take a shadowy rumour seriously if it had no meaning for him. He had a high order of intelligence much above poor Bob Mason, or Charlie Dickson—so much so that he'd never raised a suspicion in my mind he cared twopence about me; but now that the sergeant had given himself away, so to speak, I felt more excitement than regret and had to confess it to myself; but nothing I replied let him see I did, for I took him to task pretty sharp.

"You're talking through your hat, John, and splitting straws," I said. "I'm surprised that a man like you, with your knowledge of the world, should give heed to such tomfoolery. The man has never asked me to marry him, whatever his intentions may be, and I'd refuse to believe from you, or another, that he's dared to say he was going to marry me before he had his answer. Forget it, John, and come and look at my ducks. And if he does come, then what I may be pleased to answer him is my business, which you will be the first to grant I hope."

He pondered this, changed the subject and came and watched my fleet of ducks disporting in their pond. He made no return to Dickson

and took my rebuke without a word. Instead he talked about himself, which he very seldom did.

"I've taken that little grey house on the main road out of Beesworthy," he said. "The house where old Benson passed out a month since. Four rooms and in good condition and within my means."

"That cottage on the highway, that looks like a rabbit sitting up and waiting to cross the road—I know it," I replied. "A very snug place and a bit of garden behind. Mr. Benson's sister, who minded him, is going back to her married brother at Kingsbridge."

"That's right," he told me. "All ready to step into and I like doing for myself, and a good shed for my motor-cycle."

"I'm very pleased to hear that, John, and I hope you'll find it meets all your requirements," I answered.

"Where ever was the old soldier, or any other man, that found all his requirements met, Pete?" he asked, "but I shall do as well as I deserve no doubt."

We parted the usual good friends. He was well in at the Manor House now, for Sir Anthony liked the sergeant and would have him in sometimes for a yarn about the war. There was something about John's nice manners and courteous behaviour to his betters that had taken the general and he loved to talk war, which Winter understood and could follow with the right remarks. I mentioned this as we parted and he agreed it was a great privilege to have made a friend of a warrior with such a good heart.

And soon after John had revealed what was at the back of his mind, all the rumours about Charlie and myself came to a head and the innkeeper dropped in one evening after closing. And he brought a bottle of his black port wine with him.

"A present, Pete," he said, "and I've got a better and bigger one yet to offer you, my dear."

So I knew what was coming.

"You ought not to be so generous, Charlie," I answered. "Come in out of the wet and I'll dry your coat." For it was a nasty night with a strong south wind off the sea and heavy rain.

He showed up in good spirits and I could see was feeling strong hopes of success, but he approached the point very gradual and spoke of a tiresome local matter that worried people in a mild way, though nothing could be done about it.

"The lady of the manse has turned her attention to me since last I saw you, Pete," he said.

"Mrs Tozer?"

"Yes, the vicar's better half. Threequarters you might say.

Well in the saddle now and disliked wherever she goes. Everybody's sorry for him and reckons that he must be sorry for himself."

"He's a man of peace," I said, "but she's not a horse to curb, else he'd have done it. Mrs. Tozer wasn't cut out for a clergyman's wife—to say it kindly. Too busy in well-doing without taking into consideration the items. All for the parish but very unsatisfied with the people that make up the parish. She isn't Devonshire and don't grasp the Devonshire way."

"Parson must know she's putting up our backs right and left," said Dickson.

"I was talking to Mr. Townley about her a bit ago," I went on. "Very nearly at his end now is dear Simon Townley—eighty-five he tells me and terribly infirm. His man wheels him out in his chair to the flagstaff on fine days, and there I sat beside him and praised the sea and wished Mrs. Tozer was different and not so apt to be unkind. And he said, with his eyes on Start Point, that people like her, under the sleepless impulse to interfere with other people, get a tonic effect from so doing. Successful meddling cheers them up and to confound the hopes and customs and enterprises of somebody else sharpens their appetite for renewed efforts. When you can avoid such a woman,' said Mr. Townley, 'do so by all means; but in the case of a vicar's wife, parishioners find it difficult to escape. The wealthy and influential,' he said, 'are often a dangerous nuisance to their neighbours. The poor are their principal prey and I have always taken the side of the poor against them when I could.' "

"He would," agreed Charlie. "A great loss Lawyer Townley's going to be."

"What had Mrs. Tozer against you?" I wondered.

"Beer," he said. "The big annual fête and pony races and flower show is coming on again now, and Mrs. Tozer wishes me to concentrate on soft drinks this year—ginger-beer and lemonade and some mess called raspberry vinegar. She doesn't want the beer barrels in evidence at all. Said they lowered the whole entertainment, and no spirits in the refreshment booth either. She said 'Let the men come and drink tea with their wives in the tea tent if they are thirsty. We do not wish any element of alcohol introduced at all this year.' "

"Is Sir Anthony behind her?" I asked.

"What do you think? I told her I would bear her opinions in mind and I went up to the manor myself and saw the general and asked what he would wish—well knowing, of course, the answer. He puffed and said, 'If you want to see the worst effects of intoxicants, Dickson, you have only to study the effect of the word on a teetotaller.

You will conduct your business at the festa as usual.' That's what he said and that's what will happen."

I laughed and my visitor came to the point.

"But I'm not here to chatter," he began. "I'm here to give you a bit of startling news, for I fear you have never guessed at what is going to overtake you, Pete. It's been on my mind a long time all the same and, though sometimes I guessed no such good luck could be expected by me, at other times I got my tail up and felt more hopeful. And strange to say the hopeful moments were those spent in your company. You have a trick to put hope into a man and therefore I am hopeful to-night. So, to cut a long story short, I'm wishful to marry you and see you reigning over my business and myself. You've got all the gifts, my dear woman, to make me a happy man, and I've got all the gifts to make you a happy woman again, so what do you say to that?

He spoke very confidently and I could see he honestly believed he was a winner. I saw he had long mistaken my friendly speech for more than a neighbour's greetings. I have created a wrong impression that way once or twice in my life. My heart was warm most times but, as Micah once pointed out, there's an element of humbug often goes with a warm heart and he warned me against saying more kind things than in truth I felt. But I never tried to deceive Dickson and set about to answer as soon as he'd finished.

"I'm sore afraid you have took a wrong valuation, Charlie," I said. "When you want a thing, you see nothing but good and virtue and value in it, and the more you want it, the more you tell yourself how precious you would find it, my dear. But once get it, very soon the faults come out you've overlooked until it was yours. We shouldn't suit each other, Charlie, and I shouldn't suit 'Fisherman's Arms.' You need a woman twenty years younger than I am and a tidy lot younger than what you are. Somebody experienced in public service, which I am not. We'll continue to be good friends and I'll always remember gratefully enough you thought you could have done with me, but luckily for you I knew better."

"Think again; think it over," he begged. "Other people often know you a lot wiser than you do yourself, Pete, and at the 'Arms' you'd be a tower of strength. I didn't mean for you to touch the bar—God forbid; but I can see you behind the scenes helping me at every turn and raising the credit of the establishment and building up the goodwill into a higher class than ever it was."

We talked on and he tried desperately hard to make me leave it an open question but there was no call to do so.

"A lot will be sad to hear this bad news besides me," were the last

words he said, which looked very like what Sergeant Winter had hinted at when he told me how everybody knew Charlie's intentions. In fact that was made clear a week later after I met Linda Gollop and listened to her. I was taking tea with her at her cottage for I always kept in close touch with her.

"A nine days' wonder, Pete," she said, "because it's long been in the air you ordained to take Dickson, and now they tell that either he's changed his mind, or else you have."

"For gossip I never heard of any such place as this," I answered. "You'd think none of us had anything to do but chatter about their neighbours. If he told anybody he was hoping to marry me, then he oughtn't to have done so and very unlike a modest man such as Dickson."

Linda looked at me with a sort of puzzled expression on her grey, withered face.

"There's that about you always start the men on your track," she said. "You never was one to seek after them, yet you always had your pick and always drew a prize."

"I did that," I confessed. "I never as you may say ran after them, yet fell in love with two of the best that ever walked."

"Just the opposite of us—Milly and me," said Linda. "There was something about us always chilled the male. In my case that was natural, being but a scrawny creature at my poor best. But Milly was a fine figure of a woman with beautiful hair and friendly and oncoming when she had the chance. Not what you'd call a pretty woman, any more than you'd have called yourself a pretty woman, Pete, yet as good as the next one in most company, or so I always thought."

"She was," I agreed, "—all the makings of a proper wife, yet didn't just happen to meet the right one. You never know what draws the men. It ain't always our looks, but just something that takes their fancy. I like men myself, being used to them about me all my life, and I like women well also. Plenty of women friends I always had and you one of the best of them."

"And women like you I'm sure," she was kind enough to say, "which they wouldn't do if you was one of them man-hunters, Pete, because nice women hate that sort."

"I never hunted them," I assured her, "and I never noticed any man that hunted me till lately. I've done with all such tender affairs. I've aged a tidy lot since my last loss."

"You have, and well you may have," she answered. "There's no worse fate than losing a man like Micah. Some tear your heartstrings when they go; others, such as my brother David, don't hurt so bad.

Though my own flesh and blood and the head of the family, I didn't feel any tortures when he dropped out."

"No need to," I pointed out. "There was no call to be tortured over poor Dave. You never liked him to extremes, Linda, and he ended safe in his Maker's hands. Dave was the same as your Aunt Mercy in a way: what Mr. Townley calls an 'individualist.'"

"Dave being the individual himself you mean?" she asked.

"Yes: an own-self man as we say. But whereas old Miss Gollop was wrapped up in her earthly affairs regardless of all others, Dave took a higher flight in his later life when he joined the Army and put salvation first. Dear old Matthew Appleby, Tom's father, was such another. The next world had long got to be the only world worth talking about in his opinion."

"I've always tried to make the best of both worlds myself," said Linda, "with poor success, Pete."

"There's always eternity to fall back upon," I told her. "It's like a life insurance policy, so Micah used to say, but you need to keep up your annual premium money if you don't want it to lapse."

"I take your meaning," so Linda assured me. "And Lord knows I've been paying in premiums all my life."

Which I well knew she had done, for a better intentioned woman never fought on dogged through thick and thin for her reward.

CHAPTER III

THERE is no doubt if you set out to tell your life, you may be called to face up to some very unpleasant facts about yourself that have lurked hidden because they never found cause to appear; but I can't tell truth if I set out to burk them. For example I have often done a shady bit of work for other people I wouldn't do for myself; and I have passed it off without much fret of conscience. But now the case was different and I discovered to my shame that I wasn't too old to be tempted, nor yet too old to fall. My feelings in a certain quarter had once or twice disquieted me, but I laughed them away and told myself there was no fool like an old fool. They persisted, however, and it was some perfectly innocent sounding remarks of the sergeant that made them take their ugly form. Also a thing he did. He came in one evening to borrow an umbrella, because rain had blown up out of the sea and caught him when at Beesworthy just starting to go home to his grey rabbit of a house. And he stopped and talked a while with his beautiful, clean-cut manner of speech and his nice attention to all I might please to say.

"Wonderful how we agree, Pete," he told me after some words on my part. "We always have a peculiar knack of seeing life from the same angle and finding the joke hid in every mortal thing for those built to see it. There's a woman come to the Manor House with the same gift: her ladyship's new maid. I'm often in the servant's hall nowadays and always welcome, and there may be something in the wind there if I'm not mistaken, but for the moment this young woman has rather waked my interests."

"Fancy that!" I said. "Maid or widow, John?"

"Her name is Alice Coomstock—a London woman and unmarried. She's making a success with her new mistress, which you can understand, because she's been experienced with rich people and only left her last place owing to a titled lady dying. And the housekeeper likes her far better than she expected to. So does the cook."

"What does she look like and how old is she?" I asked.

"A good-looker: very smart in her person but very tasteful too. She came for a walk with me on her afternoon out last week. Stylish and ladylike. I should judge her to be five-and-thirty. Would you like me to bring her to tea one evening?"

"If you feel that way inclined, bring her by all means, John," I answered.

"You might say she was rather on the lines of your Janice," he suggested. "Not an artist and not the wonder Janice is, but a fine character. At least that's how she strikes me."

I held in with difficulty but felt my emotions to be rising.

"You can't understand much about character, John," I said, "if you dare to compare a lady's maid with Janice. Never was another like her and never will be and I should have thought you would have found out that much."

"Yes, yes: that was going a bit too far," he admitted. "Perhaps it was Alice's kind reception of me that tickled my fancy. But it's always foolish to take your opinion of somebody you know to somebody who doesn't know them. Judge for yourself, Pete."

"You can bring her on her next afternoon out, since you're so set on it," I said, "but I'm not much one for making new friends now."

"You're always one for befriending," he replied." "Thank you ever so much, my dear."

Then he put up my umbrella and off he went, and I knew without one shadow of doubt that he'd only called to mention the new lady's maid. The rain wasn't heavy and who ever heard of a soldier wanting an umbrella?

So that started me on my downward path in a manner of speaking

and, before the night had come, I asked myself whatever it was that the sergeant had said to awaken such an unpleasant sensation in me. In fact I wondered for a bit why on earth he'd wakened any sensation at all. To ask me to pleasure a newcomer was nothing out of the way; but I told myself what had pricked me was, not the stranger woman herself, but John Winter's opinion of her. It sounded unusually favourable, for he always chose to be sparing in terms of praise, just as he was equally sparing in terms of blame. And the mystery grew as to why it mattered a button to me what he thought of her ladyship's new maid, until I solved it and blushed to do so. There could be only one explanation, and that shameful: I felt jealous to hear the sergeant laud another female after being so long accustomed to hear him praise me. A nasty facer in its way—to be caught out harbouring a weakness you have always laughed at when displayed by your neighbours. For times without number I have pointed out how jealousy has no good word to be said for it. And now I felt an added fear that a man so sharp to read character as John might have discovered this blot upon my record, just as I had discovered it myself. In which case, so like as not, his high opinion would be gone and he would frequent me no more. And then I asked myself why the mischief should he frequent me, save for honour and respect of Micah? What right had I to take the attentions of such a man for granted and find myself uneasy because he was sparing a measure of his time and attention on somebody a lot younger and more gifted and doubtless far better company? Next I examined my feelings touching the man. I had found him an addition to life during Micah's time and felt satisfaction that he didn't drop his old friendship to me after my husband's death; but it was quite a peaceful sort of satisfaction: I never thought to consider what it amounted to, or whether I depended upon the friendship to any great extent for my well-being. And now there came this rude jar and my eyes were opened and the truth of my feelings displayed to me in this unpleasant manner. I never remember a wakeful night spent by me to such painful purpose and when I rose and scanned myself in the glass, I looked to have aged twenty years and withered outside as well as in. So I took myself in hand, confessed I had slipped into a silly state of self-esteem, grasped what I must long have looked like to the world at large, Winter included, and commanded myself to banish such weakness from my thoughts in the future.

Retracing the talk with John there were some things to thank God for, and one was that I had never shown any visible signs of my regard for him. At least I hoped not. My voice was steady and my mouth was firm while I listened to his trumpet of praise about Alice

Coomstock and my indignation, when he ventured to compare her with Janice, though real, served to let off a little of what he had wakened in me. And then I ate breakfast and recovered my balance a bit and laughed as usual with my little maid, Mary, and went out to my birds.

After that I made resolutions. My instinct was to despise myself, but that's a fatal line of conduct, because, if you let the people know you think small beer of yourself, they'll very quickly follow your example. So I took a higher point of view. 'You must get a grip on your nature, old girl,' I told myself, 'and remember your age and behave dignified.' I felt glad I had done the right thing in one respect and asked Miss Coomstock to tea. I wanted to see how he stood with his new friend and pick up her opinion of him if I could.

They came and I found myself not quite so natural and simple as I am with most strangers. They couldn't notice that because my line didn't take a hold-off manner, but quite the contrary. I was more hearty and pleased to see the woman than rung exactly true to my own ear. In fact I overdid the sort of welcome you usually offer to folk you have never seen before. But I kept my wits about me and played hostess to the best of my powers over an outstanding good meat tea I had arranged for them. And amazing things happened inside me during that meal—not from what I ate myself but because of the material poured into my mind. It didn't come by anything they said, but through my knowledge and understanding of the sergeant. Very difficult to put in words, yet vivid enough at the time.

Alice Coomstock was more than the age stated to me by John Winter, but she had worn well, continued to be a nice-turned, compact woman and the better for clothes that had never been made for her in the beginning. She spoke in a pleasant voice with a strong London accent and was finnicking at table. She tuned her remarks on the language of the upper classes, and you felt had got into the way of doing so after resolute practice. But she was a good listener and evidently attached importance to what the sergeant might be pleased to say. She was all for town life and a bit guarded about the joys of the country. You could see by various signs, when her real self peeped out, that her admiration for the sea was unreal. She had never lived in Devonshire before and she was frightened of the wasps that came and went through the window. One had stung her at the Manor when she was gathering flowers for Lady Balmain, and she was not a garden lover after that. She showed a good deal of reserve as to her family, but said her sister kept a hat shop in West London, and I told her I would ask my adopted daughter, Janice Appleby, the famous actress, to buy a hat there next tim

thanked me kindly and said how she had seen Janice act and it was a fine sight. She struck me as a bit on the sly side. She showed herself quite at home with John and cracked a few little jokes with him about the staff at the Manor, which I didn't follow. One concerned a footman, and the sergeant explained that this young fellow had proposed to Alice and given notice when he heard she could not accept him.

"And now, if you please, Alice wants him back!" said John.

She protested at that and slapped the sergeant's hand, and I thought how he must secretly have hated such a common gesture, for he was the last man to tolerate familiarity of any kind. All this I took in quick enough; but behind such trifling incidents, thoughts of a far different nature moved in me and before tea was ended I longed for them to go, because I wanted to sort out my observations and try to make sense of them. It became a sort of play-acting to go on behaving as John had the right to expect I would behave, and there's no doubt he did sense I was put about and trying to hide the fact from Alice Coomstock. The sergeant perceived it and, when tea had ended, he said time was running on and Alice would be due to look after her ladyship before dinner and he wanted to take her back through the woods, so they must be going.

She thanked me very much indeed for my entertainment, and hoped she might come again presently and praised Winter for bringing us acquaint. And he said the pleasure was his and not to know me was not to know Beesworthy. Then off they went; and, to begin with, I puzzled why my mind now felt so carefree and why contentment had come back to it for no very clear reason. But I did not puzzle long, because the reason soon stared out like the words upon a hoarding and my brains grasped every word of it. For what did I know? I knew beyond any doubt that the sergeant had no use on earth for Miss Coomstock, and I knew that at no time was it possible he could have. She was a female outside his scheme of action in every way and she moved on a plane much lower than John. She had the brain power proper to a lady's maid and no more, but could never have challenged his real interest for a moment. When a man decides for a woman, he knows he can't have everything, because, at best, he can only get what's there, and, of course, no man ever does know what's there in truth. Same with a woman: she may fancy she knows a man inside out, but he must be a very poor-fashioned sort of man if she does. Men are really deeper than we are, but not so downy: our craft counterbalances their cleverness. John might or might not know all that went to Alice, but he well knew what she lacked from his point of requirement and I guessed that, unless

the young woman had money saved on a tidy scale, he wouldn't have thought of her twice.

Arrived at that conclusion, the rest unfolded very swiftly. She certainly had no money to name, or else she wouldn't be engaged in her present task; so the next question was why had John gone out of his way to paint her in such brilliant colours to me? He knows very well indeed that there was nothing about her to win more than good will and just common friendship from me. He knew the only thing to interest me in her was to see if he was interested as much as he claimed to be. In plain English the sergeant had laid a trap for me and had caught me. I was clever enough to see that now but hadn't been clever enough to escape at the time. He had praised an unknown female to me; not because he really felt any excitement, but because he wanted to find the effect upon me of all his admiration for Miss Coomstock. He knew that, once I had met her, I should swiftly see he was lying as to his true opinions, but he wished to see how I would take it. And I remembered only too well how I had taken it. If I'd concealed my feelings and shown no interest whatever, then he must have known that I felt utterly indifferent as to his woman friends, but now he knew I was not.

Then arose the next problem, as to why he had been at all this trouble. He had started out to see if he could make me jealous and found he could. Jealousy don't add to the charm of the female character generally speaking, but if a man discovers a woman to be jealous about him, then he may admire her for it and think the better of her for feeling so. And that is where common sense told me how the sergeant now had learned by a cunning device what he never could have learned in any other way. "If I had not been jealous and shown it," I said to myself, "he would have concluded the case was hopeless and that I didn't care a straw about him; but now, being satisfied on that score, he will proceed at his own time." That is how the future looked to me now, and I concluded that Winter would presently offer and, if I found myself able to take him, be sure I had done so for affection alone. I was well-to-do in a small way, but I had heard him say without any false-modesty or nonsense, that there is no reasonable reason why a poor man should not propose to a rich woman when his dictates are fixed high above the accident of her cash. So the final effort of my weary wits was to consider what I should answer if or when the demand was put. More thinking went to that and a few days passed without the final decision. He was ten years younger than me and younger than his age also. I knew that to the public eye such a thing would meet disapproval and a warning from well-wishers that the sergeant was after my money, and I remembered

a talk I once had with him when he said that things being as they are money was the only way to security and power and advancement. And I said folk must all live in hope, because faith can move mountains. "Yes," he agreed, "but it can't alter facts." Which was true of course. Anyway I had absolute faith in him, and more than that: I liked him for a lot of reasons. I considered the fag-end of my days without the sergeant and felt there would creep an emptiness into them, which no doubt I could face like other elderly ones; but why choose emptiness when something cheerfuller looked to be offering?

You leave many things to be decided at the last moment, important though they may be, and I banished final decision from my mind until I had seen John again, said a word or two and shown him his deviations were not hid from me. For with him I had that easy, comfortable feeling to say what I might and joke as I pleased. Scores of funny things I had told him that never would I have told anybody else, and the same with him. He'd often said a joke is a worthless treasure if you haven't got somebody else to share it and he came by many there were none to share in Beesworthy but me. "There's some gifted creatures can go on laughing even though they've got one foot in the grave," he said once, "and that's what will be the case with you and me, Pete."

A week after our tea-party he dropped in again, to beg some feathers for his pipe, and he was in a very good temper because he had a comical piece of local intelligence for me. A warm summer day and he sat down in my garden arbour out of the sun and told me that he was going to make me laugh.

"About Miss Coomstock?" I asked.

"Lord no!" he answered. "Nothing to laugh at about her as far as I know. I haven't seen her since I took her home and heard her admire you a week ago. It's about old Cloberry—him that looks after the waterworks and the village pump and has done so for sixty years. He's going to retire, because he feels the work should be carried on by a young man now."

"Yes," I said, "and he's afraid of his life no young man can be found to carry on with his mastery. The old always doubt the brain power of the young."

"That's the joke. Any fool could do his job equally well. It only wants hands and eyes. In fact old Cloberry is no more thought upon than the village pump itself—a thing not likely to challenge attention until it gets out of order. Yet now he's running about saying a testimonial should be raised to him and, finding nobody disposed to take it on, has started to raise one himself!"

"That's rather sad if you ask me," I said.

"Sad things are often funny too, and after a week's work," continued John, "he's got but four shillings and sevenpence—and that only promised—so he's given up his testimonial and feels himself a slighted old man."

"It's a big event for us to retire, but if we have spent all our lives doing work anybody could have done just as well, then it's vain to expect a fuss when we drop out. Sad all the same."

"A time looks to be coming," said the sergeant, "when unskilled labour will count for a lot more than it does now and navvies be worth even more than black-coated workers. Because they will be harder to find in another generation or two. No clever boy who's been taught properly, is going to be a hedge-tacker or road-mender and those ready and willing to do such things will grow fewer and fewer and more valuable. Look at coal-mining, or deep-sea fishing for example: filthy, dangerous jobs, and who shall say that men to do them well are not worth more money than shop-walkers, or shorthand clerks?"

"Among the fishermen," I answered, "you'll find the older ones are all against their sons following in their steps and want them to use their school knowledge ashore. At Brixham there's not half the famous old trawling fleet left nowadays."

We talked upon this difficult question and then I took my chance.

"I don't find the old affection for the sea in younger people now," I said. "When your Miss Coomstock was here last, because I asked her to come to tea again, I offered to arrange a boating trip with Bob Mason if she'd enjoy to go on the water; but though admiring the sea from shore, she had no wish to be afloat herself."

"She's been afloat when she went to the South of France for the winter with one of her employers in the past," explained John. "But the crossing was very bad and she suffered something shocking, so no more sea for her."

"A nice girl and clever. The man will be lucky that gets her," I said. "Good quality there and a high tone."

He looked at me suspiciously.

"You thought so?" he asked.

"Who wouldn't? I quite understand how a man like you, so serious-minded, would be taken with her. A good friend for you."

He laughed and made a curious remark.

"I thought you'd see through it, Pete," he replied. "Now you can look deeper still and see why I did it."

"Perhaps I have," I answered, "and perhaps there wasn't any need to take such a roundabout way to find out what you wanted to

know. And if I had thought you could sink to such a tricky thing, I should have been prepared and you wouldn't have found out."

"So long as you've forgiven me, all's one," he replied.

"I'll let you know when I have—if I do," was my response to that.

"Try to," he urged, "and take a favourable view if you can. I'll explain myself some day."

Off he went, but I knew what was going to happen tolerably soon. It yet wanted near a month to the anniversary of my dear husband's fatal accident, when the sergeant wrote me a letter and begged I would let him come to tea as his future career might be said to hang upon what I had to say. "If I don't hear to the contrary, I shall be there," he finished up, and he didn't hear to the contrary, so he came.

He was very calm outwardly, but I could tell by his voice that he felt the occasion to be outstanding.

"I'm going to make what we soldiers call a frontal attack, Pete," he began, "and, thank God, there isn't any need to beat about the bush, because you will know what I'm going to say and I wish I had language worthy of it. But one thing you don't know and you are asking yourself why I'm here on this errand, after telling you more than once that you ought to be a sacred object to all comers for a full year from the passing of your dear late one. But my future turns on it and I must come to a decision for the sake of another person."

My thoughts flew to Alice Coomstock, but reason came to my aid before I spoke anything foolish.

"You are always one to respect the convenience of other people, John," I said, "and a good example in that matter I'm sure. But it sounds queer at a moment like this, and why another person should have hurried you to come sooner than the fitting moment I can't see."

"You have a perfect right to demand to know, Pete," he replied, "and when I tell you it is no less a person than Sir Anthony Balmain himself, you'll grasp the situation. The general has taken a liking to me and, as Watts, his butler at the Manor, is retiring, he's offered me to come to him and take up the position. Mr. Watts was an old soldier too—his batman—in the war and, Sir Anthony wants another military man over his staff and his cellar. A very fine appointment, Pete, and a job of work carrying a good salary and emoluments. Moreover, I should be well content to serve under him. There's only one future career can compare with that; but I can't keep the general waiting and, as a matter of fact, he was a bit surprised when I asked for time to turn it over. To-morrow I must tell him, and that's why I'm here to-night. I hate to rush you, but you'll forgive me."

"Yes," I said. "It explains why you are here at all, John, and now you must name the other career to compare with being butler at the Manor. I may know what you're aiming at, but on the other hand, I may not."

"I'm aiming at you," he said. "You are the only career worth a second thought to me, Pete."

My heart purred to hear him I grant, but I tried to put the sergeant's future before my own.

"I care for you John, and I care for you enough to think of you first and myself second," I explained. "If I didn't care for you that much, my affection wouldn't be worth a groat. You can look forward a good few years further than I can and if you married me, my dear man, it might be taking the shadow for the substance."

"Why so?" he inquired. "I wouldn't call you a shadow, Pete, and be that as it will, I'd sooner have a year of you than a lifetime of butler at the Manor. Age don't enter into the question at all. You're the dearest woman ever I met in my life and, if you fancy me well enough to take me, then the matter's ended."

"Oh, John!" I said. "D'you really mean it?"

"You know I mean it and I'll tell you this," he answered with his eyes twinkling, "that the happiest moment of my life till this one was when you showed temper to hear me praise Alice. Just a military stratagem, Pete—to find where I stood; and when I did find out, I very near shouted for joy!"

I chode him, but felt to be a most fortunate creature and in sight of far more good luck than my share. For it looked contrary to nature that one commonplace woman could have husband after husband and draw a winner every time! Indeed John saw that too and, in his sensible way, warned me that I mustn't expect him to rise to the heights of Micah, nor yet to all I had told him concerning my first.

"You're flouting Providence, and doing a reckless thing to try again," he said, "just as I am doing a daring and dangerous deed to try at all."

"I'll grant that," I admitted, "and perhaps never a woman would have ventured yet again but myself. Yet it seems right and proper to me. You might look venturesome to other eyes but not to mine I know you well enough by now. I've always hated being a widow John, and find myself right down pleased to turn into a wife again But you're the only man ever I met would have made me."

"Good hearing," he said, full of admiration. "And I've always wondered what it would feel like to be a husband."

"I hope you won't be a lot disappointed, my dear," I replied

and then remembered what a wise man had once told me long years ago.

"Old Matthew Appleby, Tom's father, once said to me that if you get a bad motive rising in your mind, the proper course is to nip it in the bud; but if you get a good one, then act upon it instantly, before you have time to cool down and let the devil change your mind. And I've tried to do that all my life, so now I've taken you instantly, John, because I do care for you and I never had a properer motive than to take you."

"I'm proud to hear you say so, Pete," he answered, "and now, before the deed is done, you must look at the other side of the medal, because there is another side. We think alike and feel alike and look at life alike, and if we are a thought light-hearted for folk getting on in years, that's our business; but there's your family and some of them, if not all, are not going to like this job."

"Why shouldn't they like it?" I asked him. "If they care for me, which I'm sure they do, why shouldn't they be glad to think I'm going to have my sunset along with you?"

"Don't talk about sunsets," he said, "but you must try to be a woman of the world for a minute. You're well-to-do. You were blessed with thrifty, saving husbands and you have got this fine property and some thousands of pounds behind you, all largely owing to being saving and wise yourself. And you have also got two nephews who, in the natural course of things, look to be your heirs some day."

"Both very prosperous men and making a good thing of their lives," I answered. "They know what I am to Grace, their mother, and their characters are the best sort of Blanchard characters and I've never heard either Barnaby, or Norton say a word against you."

"They wouldn't to you, and in any case I shouldn't care overmuch what they thought," he answered, "though I should regret it and soon show them their mistake. But there is one far more important than either of them, or even their mother—one so important that I wouldn't like for you to do anything contrary to her wishes, Pete."

"My foster-daughter?"

"Yes, Janice Appleby. If she was against me and said you were wrong in your opinion, I should take it very hard indeed. Not that what anybody might say would alter my feelings, but if they altered yours—that would be dust and ashes, my dear woman."

"There's no dust and ashes about Janice," I answered. "What she thinks of me I know. She's got a lifetime of experience behind her touching me. I'm far ways short of what she imagines, of course, just as I am far short of what you imagine, John, but she credits me with good sense for a humble sort of woman and she knows, anyway,

that I wouldn't do anything to make me a laughing stock. And what she thinks of you is most favourable also. She praises your opinions and mostly finds herself in agreement with them."

"That's all right," he agreed, "but this is a proposition lifting me into a much higher place than just a friend. How if she doesn't smile on it?"

"She seldom smiles very much," I said, "but she'll smile next time she sees you. She'll say I'm a crafty old lass to have trapped an innocent bachelor like you, John, and she'll be sure to remind me how much younger you are than me, with no good friends to protect you against me."

He laughed then and, in my happy and rather foolish high spirits, I made another joke.

"The one I'm properly sorry for is Sir Anthony," I said. "He's going to be sad to hear you've put a wife before the joys of looking after a hero like him and his plate and his wine cellar. Perhaps he'll think, if you could make such a feeble choice as that, you're not the man he imagined you to be."

So we fell into our usual cheerful outlook on life and talked about the future.

"You'll leave your grey rabbit house and come and live with me I suppose," I said, and he replied that was a matter for me to decide.

"You'd find my grey rabbit house rather a tight fit," he pointed out, "and I can't see you very far away from your poultry runs. You'll always want something beautiful to engage your attention as a change from me, Pete, so I'd best to disturb your way of life as little as need be."

"You'll have to start to learn about prize birds and their ways," I promised him, "and I'll reward you by trying to learn about your ways."

"You know my ways well enough," he replied, "and I know more about the birds than you think for. I haven't followed you round your coops all these years for nothing."

We might have been a pair of babbling young people for half an hour and then he talked serious and sensible again and said that he felt to be a happier man than ever he thought possible.

"Myself," he said, "I don't see why we should let many months elapse before we enter into Holy matrimony, Pete; but I'm in your hands as to that."

"I'm sure it's going to be holy enough in our case, John," I answered, "and I shouldn't like to think of any matrimony otherwise."

"Married in church, you mean?" he asked.

"I've never been married in any place else and never will be," I said.

"So be it, lady," he answered and then I had quite an idea.

"I was wed the first time from my father's home and I'll be wed the last time from there likewise," I told him. "We'll have our send off from Birch Hanger, Johnny."

"Good," he declared. "Good, if there won't be too many ghosts at the wedding for you, my dear."

A curious remark to make and I hadn't thought of that.

"Only kindly ones," I said. "There are no ghosts in my knowledge that would wish us ill."

CHAPTER IV

To be honest about yourself calls for care, because the instinct of self-protection creeps in and though you may fancy you tell naked truth, most likely you are doing no such thing. While you think to be guarding your character and drawing a veil over your weak points, it is any odds you are only revealing them and hoodwinking none but yourself. To write without giving yourself away needs a cunning beyond my reach in any case and as I now read over much that happened before the coming of the sergeant, I feel a good bit disappointed with my behaviour. The wonder grew how two outstanding, high-class men of good intelligence, each in his appointed turn, should have wakened to such devotion on my account and discovered qualities in me worthy of their attention. On my side I had loved them dearly and served them to the best of my powers, but always felt I was below their own high standards. With Sergeant Winter I stood nearer to his standards in one direction, because we saw much of a muchness about things in general and he didn't take life as dead serious as Micah or Tom had done; but, against that, I fell a mile below his brain-power, John being far more gifted in his intellects than anybody ever I had known but Simon Townley. A gulf opened there. With a young woman her charms may atone to a man for her ignorance, but such gifts depart and ignorance cleaves like a garment. My modest wits at close quarters by night and day might serve to bore the sergeant in the long run, like falling water wears away a stone. I might even reach to deeper depths of stupidity and wear out his patience if spared to do so. But then I cast away such gloomy thoughts and felt gladness to think I should have another good man about me to trust and tend.

After a triumph like this it almost frightened my soul to count the blessings piled upon it. They rose to their peak in the crowning glory of Janice. She was the noble work of a man and woman I never knew and they were robbed by death of their masterpiece, and she came to me. Not that she could take the place of my own little, red, baby Rufus, but she was finer stuff than ever I could have mothered myself.

But I now faced my third in a proper steadfast spirit. Unfavourable views showed up pretty soon, of course, and it was an amusement in its way to find which neighbours felt me to be mistaken and which approved. You never know with certainty how a betrothal appears to other eyes and while some took a dark view, where I had thought they might be pleased, others again were delighted and congratulated us both—folk I felt sure would tell me I was a fool and the sergeant a rogue.

John proved in the right as to my nephews for each in his own way showed displeasure. Their mother, Grace, never spoke of any annoyance on their behalf: she only feared I might live to rue it; but Barnaby Blanchard, the postmaster, and Norton, now head of Birch Hanger—each according to his nature—made clear they thought it all wrong. I don't remember now what Norton said to me but it was not kind. He'd got it in his head, so Prudence his wife told me, that I ordained to leave my money to his children. That was the only angle he viewed it and he seemed to think I had been faithless to the family; but Barnaby's wife, never very friendly disposed to me, went further than that. They had no children, yet now I found they counted upon half my money and never for an instant dreamed I should marry again. I learned through a side-wind that Barnaby actually said I must be certifiable. Other wild words he was reported to have spoken which shocked me a good deal; but rumour grows by what it feeds upon and much I heard was most likely the inventions of those that spread it.

I'd always counted myself to be a rich woman, but never thought of money among my riches; because a lot of things, if you hap to have them, make you so much richer than money can.

It was Linda Gollop who brought to my notice the various expressions of opinion, because she heard them flying about and personally didn't lose her affection for me. In fact she admired me more than ever and, knowing the greatness of the sergeant, felt I had been wonderful to catch him.

"I admire you for it, Pete," she told me, "but some express a good deal of astonishment that, with all your experience, you could want another, worst of all a foreigner. Others agree with me that never

was an elderly woman better able to look after herself than you are. I'm sure myself you would never have taken him unless you were well acquaint with his inner nature and satisfied with his bona fides. One or two just laugh and don't believe it's true. Charlie Dickson was heard to say in his bar that the whole yarn is moonshine and, if you had thought upon another, you'd have decided long ago. Meaning no doubt a woman that could turn him down wants better bread than is made of wheat."

"Such talk is no more than a breeze that's flown over a pigsty—here one moment, gone the next," I said. "Folk will be chattering and for many of them it's all the pleasure they ever get to remark upon their neighbours' failings. Everybody's in their right to say I'm wrong, Linda. It cheers some folk to see others heading for a mess."

"A soldier won't turn a hair before gossip," decided Linda. "When do you think to wed him, my love?"

"Soon," I said. "The event will be old history before Christmas."

I took John up to Sunday supper at my old home a week or two later and they were all there, because Barnaby and his wife joined us. It was a little on the frosty side, but the sergeant excelled himself with tact and didn't give anybody a loophole to say anything nasty without being downright rude. And no Blanchard was ever rude in my experience. I'd patched it up with my nephews by now and been patient with them, and Grace and Prudence both said nice things to John, so it passed off tolerably well and when, soon afterwards, I broke it to Grace that my wish was to be married from Birch Hanger in a small and quiet way, without any fuss or expenditure, she was willing and said it should be so.

At that Sunday supper I played a strong card and mentioned casually the delight Janice Appleby had expressed to hear my news.

"She sent a telegram when she got my letter," I said, "and her own letter came by return of post full of congratulations."

Which was true, for the girl had such an opinion of my sense that it never occurred to her I could have made a mistake on such a vital matter as another partner. She knew the sergeant well and admired his respect for art; and she said in her letter that I must tell her when it was to be, as nothing in her business would keep her away from the ceremony.

I summed it all up to Winter and he made one of his clever speeches.

"You are taking a step in the dark, John," I said, "because you have never been married before; while in my case the experience is

there. But such as walk in the dark must walk careful: I warn you of that."

"I'm walking out of the dark into the light," he replied. "Thanks be to you, the way is plain enough and no fear I'll miss it."

We made our plans instanter. He found somebody to take up the lease of his house, and the little he owned in the way of furniture and kitchen crockery were all transferred to my home at dawn on our wedding day. He was a great one to simplify life and never dawdled about anything. In truth he hadn't much to do at this time, but spoke seriously of finding occupation of a paying nature after we were married. That pleased me, for it's a great gain to marry a worker: they're better to live with than loafers.

John bought a special licence for marriage and no banns were called and the Reverend Tozer fell in with our wishes and very kindly married us at eight o'clock in the morning. Then we returned to Birch Hanger for breakfast. Janice came down overnight and being much occupied at the time, went back with John and myself to London after the wedding. For we had planned to spend a week up there by way of honeymoon and arranged what we were going to do each day of it. There was a lot calling for me at home, because I had my hands full getting some of my birds ready for a big Bird Show at Kingsbridge, and John wanted to pick my little orchard, which was going to furnish an outstanding crop of dessert apples this year.

The ceremony went off very well; but I felt glad when the rush was over and we took train—Janice and John and myself. I wore a new grey gown brightened up with a bit of rose colour and some Honiton lace John had given me for a wedding present, and he also wore grey of a darker tone with brown shoes and a trilby hat and never looked smarter. He had put on his medal for the ceremony but took it off afterwards. Janice looked beautiful as ever and told us about her work for the screen. The picture was nearly finished and she had enjoyed making it and had met some very interesting people. She was already longing for me to see and hear the picture but feared it might be best part of a year before the public could do so. She promised to send us two stalls for a very funny play running in London at the time and we promised to come and drink tea with her afterwards; but one day we set aside for the Tower of London, which John was very anxious to visit, never having done so, and another day we were going to the Zoological Gardens for my pleasure. We had also planned a visit to the Mint, because John was interested in money in all its forms and wanted to see coins actually manufactured; and on the Sunday of our week's honeymoon, we were going to a

service at Westminster Abbey. I'd been to St. Paul's on my last visit to London and now felt wishful to hear a service at the Abbey.

It is a passing strange thing, after lapse of time, how trifles cleave to your memory while big events grow dim. Of all the happenings on my third wedding-day only one ever flashes out now and again all these years after. And that was when I rose up, girded for my marriage with the sergeant and took off dear Micah's wedding-ring, which had never left my ring finger since he put it there.

CHAPTER V

ONCE in bondage I found Johnny to be a very human sort of man, and so clear was his measurement of the married state from the first that nothing about it surprised him, or disappointed him, or shook him out of his customary opinions. Once they win to victory and the novelty of their situation wears off them, most men settle down and sail under their true colours, because love and romance and such like only turn them off their course for a tack or two. They have got to keep faithful to their own characters and their bent of mind and ambitions and virtues and failings and the pattern on which their inner natures happen to be built. A wedded man's future happiness depends on whether his partner finds those qualities in him she hoped for and whether she can tune herself to support the best in him and endure, or help him conquer, the worst. Johnny, though as yet his true colours were not exactly hoisted, yet sailed on very steadfast under the flag he had always flown. He never bated of his courteous behaviour and his affection for me took all manner of tender shapes. He said he was proud of me and, in some directions, I do believe he was. Clean, smart, wide-awake at all times and gifted with great powers of observation was the sergeant; but his mental qualities showed up after marriage even brighter than before. He knew a lot about public affairs and they interested him more than our local matters. Parochial politics left him cold, though he was always much too civil when my friends dropped in, to show any weariness before their chatter. He said to me once: "Nothing hurts most of us more than to find we look absurd to our neighbours; but if you have enough sense not to mind being laughed at, then you seldom are laughed at."

But his conversation for choice ranged over bigger subjects than people. He knew a lot about foreign countries for example. A fearful civil war raged in Spain about this time and he understood

what it was all for and it preyed on his mind. At any rate he said it did. I tried to keep pace with his flights but I never minded him going out of an evening to spend an hour at the "Fisherman's Arms," though he always said that he better enjoyed to stop at home and take a hand of cards with me. We played a game called "bezique," but after a month of it the pastime bored him so fearful that we abandoned it. Then he would read to me and he read well. I always knew what irked him and he always knew what irked me. I often asked myself wherein lay the great difference between him and my other partners. He was just as good to me as either of them—restful, attentive, watchful over my health, which in truth wanted no watching. He made me feel I couldn't do nearly enough for him, just as Tom and Micah always made me feel. He wasn't so good for me, perhaps, as the others, because he pandered to my frivolous side, which they did not, but against that, he put a strain on my brain-power they never had done and sometimes I suffered from the headache after he had tried to enlighten me on one subject or another. He aged me there and I was cast down now and then to feel so far behind him; but I grew heartened on the days when I caught him up again and even passed him on some subjects.

John's master-passion was very wont to peep out and he said startling things sometimes as to that. "Since it's money values that run the earth," he told me once, "money's my god." I said he ought to know better and he asked, seeing how the world is run now, what could be better than plenty of money if you understand how to handle it in a proper manner. He was a poor church-goer but all for liberty of conscience and never dared to speak a word against religion in my hearing. He'd give me glimpses into his views from time to time and, when I asked him why he hadn't settled down long years ago and raised a child or two, he explained.

"A home is one thing and a family quite another," he said. "The average man may hope for a home and a woman to share it, but he shirks children and the Great War gave women a turn against breeding, too. There was a time when I'd like to have had children myself, but I couldn't have given them a decent chance. And millions of army men felt the same. Useless to talk about the population going down when the mass of us couldn't afford a home at all, let alone a family."

Then he said one of those blunt things, which made me gasp, or laugh as the case might be.

"It was you that decided I should find anchorage and a home at last," he declared. "Being blessed with good means you could afford the amusement of marrying a poor man. Few women can do that.

You bought me, Pete, and it's my first object in life now to make you feel you got a good bargain."

And then I laughed myself helpless, because what could be funnier than an old widow buying a retired, non-commissioned army officer?

"As if you hadn't got enough pets already!" said the sergeant, "and smart though I may be, I can't compare with your Amherst cock-pheasants, my love!"

In everyday life other aspects of John would come into the picture. I had not realised before marriage how much more energetic he was than myself, how much tougher and less dependent on comfort. In truth he was years younger than his age if he had not lied about it, but I never knew him to tell a falsehood and counted him to be, as he claimed, ten years younger than myself and no more. He applied for work in the gardens at the Manor and got it and was soon greatly valued by Mr. Hope, their head man. And Sir Anthony forgave him for not going as butler when he knew the reason for his refusal.

As time passed the sergeant showed no change. In fact he overdid his admiration sometimes and would ask for my opinions and advice and listen with attention as if my least word was well worth hearing, though I knew well enough nothing I had to say mattered in the least, except in trifles involving my own comfort. But he thought of many additions to that. He'd shower gifts on me and, if he thought I wanted a new bird, or a new bonnet, or what-not, he went about to get it in secret for me. When he could pay for it himself, he did; when he couldn't, he let me. Which I was always happy to do, for the will and thought behind such gifts were his and dearer far than the things themselves. He became quite good friends with my nephews and we often went to Birch Hanger on a Sunday for a meal and Prudence often came to me and brought one or two of her children.

Janice came and went, but best she liked for us to go to her Dartmouth home, perched up above the sea, and during the first Spring after I had wedded John, we went to spend a Saturday till Monday with her when she was in residence. She sent her own car to Beesworthy for us—a most beautiful affair driven by a bright young man in a dark green uniform. She was just her simple, devoted self, full of joy to see me under her roof as always, and she welcomed the sergeant with great friendship and told him that we both looked ten years younger since we joined up.

We sat out on her veranda after tea one evening and she bade John light his pipe, knowing that was his refuge. Then she looked out at the sea—a May evening it was, very bright and peaceful.

She bade me mark how beautifully a blue fir tree she had planted shone out against the golden light on the sea and she went on to say how she found the harmonies of nature and the harmonies of music chimed together. She declared her love for music and said that, after me, music was growing into the prime interest of her life.

"It never meant much to me in my early years," she said, "except as the accompaniment of dancing, or the arts of the theatre—vital, yet less important than they were, but now, as I learn more and more what great music means, it towers higher and higher above the other arts and influences my life even more than they can. When I think what existence would be without music now, I tremble, Mother."

Music never meant much to me except a few old tunes which Micah had loved to hear.

"It can be a great comfort for the sake of memory, my love," I said to her. "A tune will sometimes bring back to me the day when I heard it and make me the happier."

"Music can be an unutterable comfort," she agreed, "and a perfect singing voice, so experts say, is the highest music of all; but I am not educated up to that. There is one voice: Madame Melba's, which is the loveliest sound I ever heard. I know her and her heart is as lovely as her voice. But to me the music of a great orchestra lifts me out of myself like nothing else."

"I used to feel that, Janice, when I marched to the Guards Band," said John, and she said she was sure he must have done so and changed the subject.

She dwelt on the peace of nature perched up in her home and the way it fortified her when she sped away from art and town and just brooded on the things that changed not. Sometimes nature made her brave, so she said; but she granted that at other times she felt indignant and frightened before it.

"We bring our human values and human hearts to nature," she said. "We make the silly mistake of attributing to her our own ideas about good and evil, then let ourselves be shocked and cast down at her way of doing things. The fact is that the beauty or ugliness of nature lies entirely in ourselves, not her. There would be no beauty in the moon rising over the sea, or the morning star glittering upon some ivory dawn if our eyes and imagination did not put it there. Beauty is our discovery, like truth and righteousness."

We listened while she ran on, but the only beauty I was mindful of lay in her lovely voice. John kept quiet and I just heard his match scrape as he lighted his pipe again.

"And what an awful thought," cooed Janice, "that nature gave us life and yet we have to fight her from the cradle to the grave that

we may keep life long enough to justify it. What a melancholy, miserable thought, Mother!"

"Then don't think it, my love," I begged her. "When your thoughts offer to get you down, best change them."

"People say that Nature is only another name for God," went on Janice, "but that's a dreadful idea to me and shows a terribly poor opinion of the Everlasting."

Then the sergeant spoke and agreed with her.

"Don't you believe any such thing, my dear," he said. "Nature is God's invention to run the Universe, but no more the Almighty Himself than a motor-car is the man who invented it. From our point of view Nature looks to be a tolerable dreadful machine, but not half so fearful as some of our own machines."

Janice approved this.

"To be born a mammal is very trying, Johnny," she told him, "but better, of course, to be born a conscious mammal than something else."

"Aye," answered the sergeant, "and to be born a mammal with a good income is the best of all, Janice."

"The poor animals make plenty of money for us, but not for themselves," admitted Janice. She went on again in a cheerfuller tone of voice, and turned her attention to the moon.

"Low summer moons are more mellow and gentle, but the high winter moons give greater light really," she said. "I've spent hours looking up at them both, Mother, and I find the summer moons make you happier; while the winter moons make you wiser, if you understand what I mean."

"Not in the least, my love," I replied, "the moon is always just the moon to me, but no doubt you are right if you say so."

"Moonlight is more likely to make you silly than wise, Janice," suggested my husband; then off she went again, still up in the air, where common folk couldn't very well join in.

"I often think about the work our eyes do for us and we never thank them," she declared, "but a still more wonderful thought is that they do not show us all the best things we can see! I believe really that only when we shut our eyes we see the things that matter most. Think of what blind Milton saw: things perhaps he would never have seen at all if he had not lost his sight."

Then the name of Milton put her in mind of something we could understand and she laughed.

"I oughtn't to laugh," she said, "before that solemn name, but often even such a name as Milton conjures up a funny thing."

"Who was the gentleman?" I asked.

"England's greatest poet but one," she answered. "A very mighty man indeed, Mother; and when a schoolboy was asked about Milton in his examination paper, what do you think he said? He wrote: 'John Milton was a poet who married and then wrote *Paradise Lost*; but after his wife died he cheered up and wrote *Paradise Regained*.' Just a step from the sublime to the ridiculous. They are always jostling each other in our limited brains."

"Sure enough they do," I agreed.

But now the sergeant pushed me to the front, so that I should speak a bit.

"Talking of jokes," he said, "did the Missis ever tell you about William and Sally Cann?"

"There wasn't any finish to their tale till quite lately," I began, "because the end of William only happened six months ago. Everybody has a number of shadowy people drifting through their minds—folk we only remember when we hear they are dead; and it was so for me with Mr. Cann when I heard he'd gone. Then both he and his wife came back to my memory again. Sally was a woman so terribly interested in her own life that she upset the balance of his for poor William Cann, and when he found, day in, day out, how much more devoted she was to herself than to him, he grew a thought downcast. She was his second and a deal younger than Bill, but took him for his market garden and his savings, while he, being a childless widower, put all his eggs into one basket when he married again. However, Sally's way of always looking on ahead got upon the man's nerves after a while; and when he found her to be far more interested in the future than the present, it struck him as lacking in a proper wifely attitude, especially when she fell into a habit of beginning her remarks with the words, 'When you are dead and gone, dear William.' Then a day came when, much to her surprise, William fastened upon this expression and said that nothing excited him less than what was going to happen after he was dead, and thanked her to remember he was not dead yet and wouldn't be leaving a day sooner than God pleased. He was a big man, nearer seventy than sixty, but in the best of health. Sally was never flustered or put about, because the opinions of other people didn't trouble her at any time.

"'It's only common sense, Will,' she said, 'seeing I'm twenty-three years younger than what you are.'

"'Common sense be damned,' he answered. 'Give me common decency. I'm good for another twenty years, be it as it may, and I'll thank you to keep my death off your tongue. If 'tis your favourite subject, well and good,' he said, 'but I'm tired of it.'

"Sally took up her work and left the kitchen where they were talking, and no doubt if her eyes could have knocked ten years off poor William's existence, they would have done so. She was said to have plagued the man pretty bad behind the scenes as time travelled with them; but then a very unexpected thing overtook the Canns and it was Sally herself began to exhibit signs of wear and tear, not William! He had the blessings of a good digestion and a great power of sleep which stood him well against his yoke-fellow, for he slumbered like a top the minute his head touched the pillow, which is a helpful armament against curtain lectures.

"And now, still devoting her energies to the future, Sally continued to overlook the present. But it didn't overlook her. She came of a family gifted with second sight and she had a pinch of that, too, for one event she saw coming long before it happened.

"When she was turned fifty and less hopeful about her adventures after Bill's death than she used to be, Mrs. Cann suddenly got a deathly fear of horses and would never sit behind one again, let alone drive one. She'd been market woman at the gardens and made no bones about driving the cart from Beesworthy parish to Kingsbridge, or Dartmouth; but now she said openly that it had come into her mind cruel fierce she must never travel behind a horse again, for if she did, the steed would make trouble and most likely shorten her days."

I stopped to think a moment at this point and remember what an innocent horse had done for me, and Janice spoke.

"I believe in second sight myself," she said, "and it can be inherited, Mother."

"Knowing it was in her family," I went on, "William took it seriously and respected her wishes. Very inconvenient for him, no doubt, but he had the spirit to face inconvenience and plenty of chances to practise doing so. In fact he was a very good and kindly husband, as all agreed, and he stood up for Sally and only saw her better side, which, of course, she had like everybody else. But then she began to be sick and get further fancies and, before you could look round, her nature turned in upon herself more and more and shut out her fellow-creatures more and more. William said the only hand she ever wanted to touch was her own—to feel her pulse. A martyr to her own heart-beat she became, and her symptoms rose to be the chiefest subject of her conversation."

"I can see her, weaving a web out of nothing but herself, like a spider, and losing herself in it," said Janice. "How many of us do!"

"The symptoms began to pile up presently," I continued, "and Doctor Meadows attended pretty regular, for it was in his day. Then

poor Sally's note changed and, instead of talking about when William was dead, she began to talk about when she would be. Which he felt to be very sad, but more reasonable and better manners. She went downhill slow and steady and, after despairing of her system and her bodily organs, sucked comfort from reflecting what her heavenly reward was like to be after a life spent in such an orderly Christian fashion as hers.

"She kept up her trust in her second sight to the last for, when she was no more than a dead leaf waiting to flutter from the bough, she commanded William to let no horses draw her to the grave. 'Let four undertaker's mutes carry me,' she said, 'and any money saved can go to my grave.' She had devoted a good deal of thought to that by now and liked to picture it, though you'd think a body must be very far gone to win any consolations out of their memorial stone. But Will promised it should be all she wished. Sally had a fancy for a marble dove sitting on a white marble cross with four steps and gold lettering and a few sundries and some verses—the same as those set on her mother's grave; and Cann agreed that nothing could serve better.

"Then she passed on, and a serious thing happened, because her family—the Bassetts—wouldn't hear of a walking funeral and were shocked at such a thought and didn't for a moment believe it was her own wish. The funeral was to do honour to the Bassett race, and William, being now in a frame of mind when he found it hard to deny anybody anything, yielded to their opinions and agreed for a proper hearse with black feathers and two horses and two mourning coaches to follow after. But then Sally's second sight came in, for the steam-roller frightened the horses just as the *cortège* was passing it and, though they had never galloped before in living memory, they took charge and bolted not a quarter of a mile after the start. Andrew White was driving and, if he'd cleared the cattle-trough, all might have been well, except for the shame of a galloping corpse; but he didn't and his off-wheel came away and the door flew open and Mrs. Cann was in the street upside-down a moment later. Thank the Powers nothing indelicate overtook her, for not a screw shook. So she was picked up and carried on foot to her grave after all, and the Bassetts confessed their mistake when too late, while in course of time William followed out the wishes of the dead and set up just that identical monument Sally directed—the dove and her mother's verses and everything."

"I must see it next time I come to Beesworthy," said Janice. "A very human story. And what became of Mr. Cann? I don't remember him."

"Sold out and went up country, my love," I answered. "He's gone, too, now. He never intended to lie along with Sally and sleeps in another Yard with his first wife. He had his queer fancies, too."

Janice now started to talk on second sight in rather a creepy manner I thought. But presently her man indoors hit a gong and she said that was the call to get ready for dinner and so we all went in. Half an hour later her man hit the gong again and we took our evening meal. She had got very stylish in her ways now and liked everything most superfine in glass and crockery and table furniture. She could afford to live among beautiful things and there's no doubt they added a great deal to her comfort; but I never felt Janice to be an absolutely happy woman after her sad love affair, and John thought she was too ambitious for perfection in her acting to be right down happy.

After a nice dinner we went to her drawing-room and turned on a gramophone, which my husband said must have cost a fortune. She played the music she liked and John declared it was very melodious and I agreed, but as I remember there was nothing much to catch hold of until she played her friend, Madame Melba, singing *Home Sweet Home*. That was the loveliest voice ever I heard in my life, and I felt disposed to cry and said, if all the same to her, I'd go to bed now and not hear anything after it. Then the blessed woman was delighted to have pleased me so well and promised, when she went back to London, to send me a gramophone with various beautiful songs including this one. And after that John and I retired.

We spent a restful, uplifting time with the precious girl and agreed that she had carried us a bit out of our depth from day to day, though done in a most agreeable fashion. I was long used to being mystified by her speeches, but that visit came as something new to the sergeant and he took a very respectful view of her opinions, while granting they often drew him off his customary beat. He spoke of her as we drove home in her beautiful motor-car on the Monday morning when our visit ended; and it was then he said words that gave me great satisfaction to hear.

"She's a very gifted creature," he declared, "and a great one for soaring. Her flights take us rather out of our range, Pete; but though we can't cut any ice up there, she's very happy to descend and come down and properly proud of being your foster-child. She's told me in so many words that she never feels so happy and content as when along with you, and I well understand that, because I don't, either."

"So long as you never find me on the dull side and don't feel any impulses to fly away, Johnny, that's all I ask," I answered.

"You're my haven and my home," he said.

Then he went on to talk of Janice and doubted not she must be an object of envy in her profession.

"Got all the gifts, she has," he said. "Beauty and brains and a mistress of her art so that it returns to her in the shape of big money. There are scores of artists in the world no doubt, but how many of them win a fortune out of their gifts? Not a lot be sure. She has the luck to get it both ways: do what she wants and loves to do and find her efforts bring in not only fame but hard cash. A fairy story most of her sort would tell you."

"She's had her troubles all the same," I said; "and nobody knows how fortunate or misfortunate another may be. I don't care a button about her greatness, but I do feel proud of all her goodness, and so do many more folk she's befriended than we can guess at."

"Actors and actresses are famous for their generosity to each other," so the sergeant told me. "But the brightest stars set soon or late and then their money-value sets with them. You must warn her to look ahead, Pete, and not be too generous to lesser folk."

I often feared John's finest instincts came up against a brick wall when the thought of cash intruded upon him; but all that mattered was he felt me to be his haven and his home, because he well knew in his heart no money can buy half that goes to a home.

CHAPTER VI

JANICE kept her word and I never knew her to depart from it. She sent me a wondrous gramophone and the sergeant said it looked to be quite as valuable as the one we had listened to in her house. And with it came plenty more things that seemed melodious to me and John.

He carried on active and lively as a cricket; time left no impression upon him and his energy never bated from month to month, or year to year, while, for my part, I couldn't but feel by little reminders that time, though merciful, hadn't forgot me to the same extent. Nor anybody else, save only John. A year passed over us, dropping a pinch of rheumatism into my left leg, which Dr. Tanner didn't show any deep interest in, and I found my experience to be echoed by a good few other sufferers. Tanner knew, no doubt, that rheumatics were beyond his power to cure, because science couldn't take the ailment in hand and put a stop to its devastations. He used a lot of long words and said my variety of rheumatics wasn't by any means

the worst. He gave me a bottle of salty stuff and told me to take no more sugar in my tea and one or two other penances with regard to food. My husband formed a poor opinion of Dr. Tanner henceforward but admitted he couldn't work miracles, while, for me, Johnny was more attentive than ever, and no woman could have abounded in cleverer thoughts to comfort my leg than he did. There was in truth a streak of the woman in him, and it came out in all manner of tender ideas on my account. We went for a sea trip twice one summer, for he knew how I loved to be on deep water; but he avoided *The Devon Queen*, because of my memories how Micah had triumphed upon her. Instead he arranged for our excursions to take place on another paddle-boat; and what man but the sergeant would have done a delicate thing like that?

Again, he surprised me. I had only to make a remark, and forget it the next minute, to find he hadn't forgot it and my wish was gratified. In little things he would fling his own small cash about with a light heart to pleasure me; but if we ever had a difference of opinion, it turned on my big money concerning which he knew everything of course. In fact Micah and he had often talked upon Johnny's favourite theme and failed to agree. Our wealth was all in what they call "gilt-edged" Government securities, which were held in those days to be safer than anything: "as safe as the Bank of England" the saying was. But Winter held how three and a half per centum, which we now got upon it, by no means represented its true value. He scorned the War Loan and urged Micah to go into another line of country and get a far greater return for his savings and my Appleby savings, which were all in the same boat. However, my husband never would take John's advice and, well knowing his fixed intentions, when it all came to be mine, I stood firm in this matter and told the sergeant, once for all, that my fortune must stop where it was under Micah's direction.

"You would be the last to oppose the wishes of the dead, my dear," I reminded him, "and why want more? All mine is yours, as you well know, and in the course of Nature, you'll get it."

"It's not for myself," he would reply. "It's so that you should have more luxuries and comforts out of your money, Pete; but as for me, if you went before I did, I shouldn't care either way, because doubling the money, as I soon should do, wouldn't take your place."

"You mustn't make an idol of me," I told him once and he had his joke about that.

"Your money may be rotting in the Funds," he said, "but I shall look to it you don't suffer from too little. If I thought you were

going short, I'd break in at the Manor some fine night and help myself to half a ton of plate to keep you going."

But we had more than enough and he knew I was steadfast. I showed him my will one night when he happed on his favourite theme. It wasn't drawn by Mr. Townley, because the dear man had gone out of business now; but a lawyer he named to me at Kingsbridge had made my intentions all clear. My relations were well-to-do and both my nephews had plenty, so what more seemly than to leave all to John? He was my first thought and duty, and those who had left me my money would have had no quarrel with my arrangements.

"There are no pockets in shrouds, Johnny," I told him, "so I can't take back their lawful money to Tom and Micah when I die. That's an earthly contrivance and has got to stay down here along with you. And my house also, though it's little likely you'll remain at Beesworthy when we have to part."

He excited a good deal of interest in the parish as I heard from different sources. A man with a warlike past and married to a Beesworthy woman of the Blanchard family was sure to challenge attention. Some thought very highly of him, while a few, who chose to dislike him through jealousy, took another line and hinted that, behind all his open good will and friendship, the sergeant had got a side hidden from every eye but his Maker's, and was a foreigner anyway. They hinted of a gap in John's history, unknown even to me, and then started to fill the gap with all manner of inventions of their own silly breeding. Where the tales came from none could say, but when they filtered to my knowledge, I'd hand them on to my husband for a laugh.

"Nothing like a bit of mystery about you to win attention," he said. "Everybody loves a mystery: it gives them something to think upon and, if it's a horror, then they have the pleasure of feeling their flesh creep."

For instance a rumour took wing and, like most of them, nobody knew its nest; but it cropped up at the "Fisherman's Arms" by all accounts, though when I challenged Charlie Dickson on the subject, he swore he never heard a word of it till I told him. It was a pretty grim bit of work even to my ear and I felt a great deal of righteous indignation when I heard it from Linda Gollop, who couldn't remember who told her. But we never ran it to earth and Johnny only roared with laughter and wondered who the bright soul might be to invent such an outrage. I told him when he came back after five o'clock from the Manor, for he still worked there and had got a rise; but he was growing tired of gardening now and in a mind to find something different before another winter.

"Now, my lad, I know the very worst ever about you," I said as he sat down to his evening meal. "The secret is out and the parish properly up in arms."

"What's the latest?" he asked. The stories concerning him he felt to be rather a feather in his cap and he liked to hear them; but I reckoned he was not going to like this one, because it made him a right down rascal.

"Have I done a murder, Pete?" he inquired, and I pulled a serious face and said that, from my point of view, he had gone one worse even than that.

"It's been whispered that you have got a wife in a lunatic asylum—driven there by your wicked cruelty," I said. "And you may guess what I felt when I heard that. Enough to spoil any woman's tea that was."

The sergeant shouted with laughter and slapped his leg, which he did when greatly amused. He made a number of jokes about it, and pretended to wonder who had found out his secret at last; but I told him he must have a right down malicious enemy somewhere to start a wicked story such as this. But he couldn't think of anybody to invent such a nasty lie.

"The mischief of a falsehood like that is you can't disprove it," he said. "If you could fasten the rumour on one pair of shoulders, then you might summons the culprit and get him punished for libel and shown up; but who's going to confess to such an invention? Shameful nonsense but you can't get away from the funny side. I promise you one thing, Pete, I shan't waste any time trying to drive you into an asylum. I know you a lot too well for that."

Then he started off laughing again; but next day, after he'd slept on it, he took it more seriously and in a manner of speaking spread the ugly story himself in his efforts to run it to earth. He didn't succeed, however, but wakened a good bit of anger among his friends in the parish and, if the liar had been discovered, I feel pretty sure the folk must have handled him roughly. It remained a mystery and died out a mystery for, as John himself said, the problem was to know anybody at Beesworthy with brains enough to invent such a tale.

When Janice heard about it at our next meeting, it interested her as much as it interested us. She agreed with him that the real problem was to find why anybody should hatch such a fantastic yarn at our expense. She said it was a psychological enigma, whatever that may mean, and had a theory it was more likely to be the effort of a female idiot than a male. But nothing ever came out and the shameful affair soon died down, like smoke off a rubbish heap.

There were two lives drawing to an end and hovering in the

balance at Beesworthy now and dear Simon Townley was first to go. The rising generation knew little of him, but a good few beside myself remembered his work for the common good and plenty of folk told of his virtues. He died a very old man and was buried with his relations at Kingsbridge. A nephew inherited all he had to leave and John saw his will in the newspaper and told me he had left twenty-two thousand pounds. One thousand he left for the upkeep of a fisherman's rest house at Beesworthy which he had erected many years ago. He was the cleverest man that ever I knew and I went to his funeral at Kingsbridge and Johnny went with me.

The other life-long friend that passed on a few months later was poor little Linda Gollop in her middle seventies. During her last illness she got very low and died taking her usual poor view of life in general. Her thoughts were much turned to her long home, as poor Sally Cann's used to be at the finish; but she didn't expect near so much as Sally had.

"It's queer to feel there's scarce a soul in heaven I look forward to meeting," said Linda to me once when I was sitting beside her.

"You mustn't feel that way," I answered. "Those you didn't like will have grown likeable there, Linda, and you'll find your own family improved out of knowledge. And Mildred and Dave and your dear parents all waiting to welcome you and show you round."

"There's Milly," she granted, "but she may not want to neighbour with me any more after all these years. We can't tell how our old friends, who are settled in there, will receive us when it's our turn. Or they may never know I've arrived at all, or even recognise me if they see me!"

"That's a miserable view to take of the hereafter," I said, "and you mustn't do it, Linda. Even at my age, there's already scores I look forward to meeting again, and I'm sure they will know me at a glance and I shall know them, too, and we'll greet each other with great happiness."

"In your case that may be, but not in mine," she answered. "I never had the touch to gather any friend but you, and I shan't up there any better than I did here."

"You have been too humble and meek all your life," I said, "but you'll get a better conceit of yourself in eternity, my dear, and you'll leave plenty of well-wishers at Beesworthy. Folk care for you more than you think and I'm asked a dozen times a day how you are faring and whether there is anything they can do for your comfort."

Then came a morning when I looked in, with two lovely peaches from the Manor that Hope had given Johnny for me; but they came too late; for Linda had passed away peacefully in her sleep, just as

her Aunt Mercy had gone long years ago; and I remembered how Milly once told me that all Gollops were apt to die at the zero hour.

Nothing overtops anything else in my memory at this season except one painful affair in the matter of my Seebright bantams. Children went on streaming into the world, for good or ill as usual, and, among rising families, was that of Adam Parsons at High Chimneys Farm. He had married Nelly Trundle soon after her sister, Prudence, took my nephew, Norton, and Nelly was the mother of five by now. Though Nelly Parsons wasn't to me by any means so dear as Prudence Blanchard, yet as the years passed by, I'd got to know her very well and befriended her offspring. She was happy in her husband and shared my passion for birds, while Adam's old deviousness, when he tried to catch Dolly Bowden and failed to do so, was forgotten now and he jogged on with credit for being a trustworthy farmer. As for his twin brother, Abel, he never married but also proved a respectable fashion of man in his middle age. So, when these things happened, it was a good bit of a puzzle to know where the instincts behind them had arisen from, for when a boy and girl comes to be outstanding, the first question always is where such exceptional qualities arose. Unfortunately the manifestations in this case were to the bad and we had a good bit of talk as to where they might be traced. Nelly granted that in the Trundle family there were queer cases and one or two odd members long dead and forgot. Her Aunt Judith for example committed suicide at forty-two because her hair was turning grey, and for no other reason whatever, and her mother's brother, Septimus, always held he was related to the royal family and hovered on the border-line of insanity to his dying day; but Nelly's parents never did anything untoward, nor yet their other relations. In any case the trouble arising from little Sammy Parsons didn't point to madness, but all the other way for he was sharp as a needle, only his cleverness had took an ugly turn. He had always been a difficult child and Nelly no doubt loved him best according to a mother's usual way with her difficult ones; but Adam hated his son and, when he had turned no more than seven years old, told me that he could see evil looking out of his eyes—a fearful thing to tell of your first-born.

"They say," said his father to me once, "that the Lord hateth nothing that He hath made; but if He don't hate our Sammy, then He's the only body who don't."

It was a melancholy attitude but plenty agreed with Adam and looked forward to the day when the youngster was going to be sent to a boarding school. And the time had come, or near it, for when Sammy and his mother visited me and took tea with me for a purpose,

only a few weeks remained before the child would be packed off till Christmas. Nelly had come to see my show pair of Seebrights—lovely birds and very nearly the best and most perfect bantams I had ever raised. In a fortnight's time they were going to Kingsbridge Poultry Show and about as certain of the Cup as a pair of birds could be; but they had a special interest for Nelly because she was a fancier too and would show a most hopeful brace of bantams in the same class herself. You never know at a competition how it's going to be, because the judges are human and have all got their likes and dislikes in the matter of points but, when Nelly saw my beauties, she granted in her frank fashion that not a judge in the land was going in any doubt about them.

"Never there was such a pair before," she said, and then went on to think it waste of time and entrance money to bench hers; but I warned her against any such opinion.

"You never know," I explained. "That's the sport of showing. There's always the gamble as to what may be in a judge's mind. And judging is thirsty work and sometimes an extra whisky and soda will turn the scale one way or another."

I made her promise to show in any case, because I had seen her birds—a very high-class pair—and felt there might be a chance for a win and still better chance for second prize if I did.

Nelly held her young hopeful by the hand and Sammy listened to our talk but kept his mouth shut. He made a very good tea and I tried to get him to chatter and could see his little brain working and how he'd got plenty of ideas but preferred to keep them to himself. As long as a child is too young to hide his wickedness you can generally stand up to him and nip it in the bud; but when he has learned to hide it, then he's got you.

Six days later a very sad and improper thing overtook us and, going to my birds as usual a week before the Show, I found the Seebright bantams were lost to me for evermore. The night had been still and peaceful enough and not a sound in it to break our slumbers or hint of evil. But we had no dog for the minute to watch over us through the dark hours, for when our last dog went home, much to my sorrow, John was in no mind for us to start another.

"Limit your affections, Pete," he said, "and you'll lessen your miseries. The fewer living things you let yourself care for, the fewer you need to mourn when they drop out."

I didn't agree with him and shall always say that if we had kept a good, faithful dog, he might have raised an alarm in plenty of time for us to get out and save the Seebrights, but there was no protection for them; we slept as soundly as usual and when I rose up and went

down house to give them their morning meal, there they lay done to death with their little necks wrung. Only human hands could have served them so, for they were safe against all four-footed creatures; but their separate cage had been opened and the bantams killed and no hurt done to anything else. However, we didn't waste our time raging against those responsible, and John took a firm hold on himself and set to work to find clues and get after the criminals while the scent was hot. The birds were stiff and cold and he judged they had been dead for many hours, but, look as he might, he couldn't discover any traces or get any evidence. He advised against going to the police at first and backed himself to find the enemy but, though it may sound unlikely seeing how I have told about Sammy Parsons, neither the sergeant nor myself associated him with the murders. For my part I never thought of a quiet, ten-year-old boy doing such an aimless and dreadful thing, and John reckoned it must be somebody outside the parish, who wanted me to lose the Bantam Cup and took this hateful way to do it. He never linked the folk from High Chimneys with the crime, but he inquired into the other competitors for the Cup and took a lot of trouble to find their names and learn about them. They were mostly females and nobody had anything to say against any of them, least of all myself, for I'd known them all for years. After that the sergeant changed his mind and said the deed must be blazed abroad and the police informed.

Our inspector of police was a very nice man and personal friend of John's. He too had fought as a young man in the Great War and, by the same token, Inspector Nutting felt tolerably certain that the way things were going he might live to see another war even greater yet. Nutting was none too pleased when he heard about the slaughter of my bantams and said we should have let him know instanter and not tried to find who had done it without the assistance of the law. But Beesworthy soon heard the story and rumours echoed around and I felt no surprise when Nelly Parsons came over to me in deep indignation and distress to hear of my loss. And yet, so queer is the action of the human mind, that something about the talk we had gave birth to discomfortable ideas in my brain. She set my thoughts in a certain direction and, when I could do so without raising any painful suspicion in her mind, I made mention of her son.

"You'll be losing your Sammy soon I suppose," I said. "You'll miss him round the house, my love."

"I shall," she granted and her face fell. "His father's glad and looking forward to it, but I'll feel the parting a lot, Pete."

"Is he standing up to it himself?" I asked.

"Not too well. He's down in the mouth for him. He pretends

he likes going to school but, now the time's come, he's not very gay. Adam thought last night that he's almost as if he was frightened."

Those were the words that put me on the right track and three evenings later Nelly came in to me again—dressed in her market clothes and white as curds. She entered in, sank down upon a chair and burst into tears—a most unlikely thing for her to do—but copiously she wept, and while she shook and heaved, I spoke kindly words to her.

"You've took Sammy to Kingsbridge on his way to school, my love," I said, "and I can guess what's in your heart only too well."

However I had guessed wrong about her heart, though quite right as to the fact she had just seen her child off into the world. I brewed some tea and gave her a cup and presently she found herself equal to speech. The poor mother had suffered a deal of woe and greater things by far than packing off Sammy were in her mind.

"The fearfullest stroke that ever fell upon me," she began. "I'm broke down to the earth, and shall never be the same woman again, Pete."

"Come, come," I answered. "Not like you to talk that way, Nelly."

"Listen," she begged. "Listen while the hideous thing's naked in my mind. I'm here to throw myself on your mercy, but I doubt even your mercy can rise to it."

"Easy to be merciful at my age," I said. "And who are you to want mercy anyway?"

"Not for myself," she answered, "but there's times when every mother may cry out for mercy to what's dearer to her than herself."

That was pretty deep thinking for Nelly Parsons.

"Get on with it then," I said.

"He talked to me—Sammy talked to me while I was driving him to the railway station. He asked me not to tell Mr. Nutting where he had gone to and, when I asked him what the inspector would want to know for, it came out. When Sammy was here with me and we looked at your Seebrights, he heard you say that yours were better than mine, but that, barring yours, mine should win the Cup. And he made a frightful resolution in his mind that they should. There was only one thing to stop your birds from winning, and he crept out of the house that dreadful night and killed your birds and crept back afterwards all unknown, as he was well able to do. For me he done it, Pete. Then came the rumpus and he heard me say what I thought about it and that got him down. On the way to Kingsbridge he let it out to me—half triumphant, half terrified—and if I was worth a damn I'd have turned round the horse and drove him to the police

I couldn't do it!"

She wept again and I gave her my dry handkerchief.

"You must keep hold of yourself, Nelly, and I'm glad you brought this tale here," I said. "A child will often have a very good motive for doing a disreputable deed. They ain't born with consciences. All Sammy thought upon was for you to win over me and his little mind set to work how you should. There was only one way he could hit upon and because he felt you must win the Cup, he took that way. He never asked himself the wickedness; he only asked himself the danger and he welcomed the danger, because he's born to enjoy danger. My birds stood between you and the Cup and that was enough for him, and they had to go. You must win the Cup: that was the reason for his deed. It wasn't done for hate of my birds, or hate for me."

"He was never one to hate," said Nelly, "though no child ever earned more hate himself."

"His school will teach him you can't do hateful things without being hated," I answered.

"His father will give him in charge when he hears about this," she told me.

"Then don't let him hear for the minute," I advised. "There's the good name of your family and the future of that child. Tell nobody until I've had a talk with John. He is merciful-minded and will know the right line of action."

I calmed her down and made her promise she wouldn't tell Adam, for my feeling now was that John and Inspector Nutting should get together and decide the proper thing to do."

"We'll leave it to the sergeant, Nelly," I said. "A lot of very shameful deeds have been done from high motives, but you shouldn't do evil to one person that good may come to another. The child calls for attention in his character because, if a ten-year-old can do such a cruel, heartless thing, what will he be turning his attention to when he's twenty?"

She prayed again that I might feel it was possible to show mercy.

"There's none else can be expected to show it," she said, "and the inspector's a policeman, and mercy isn't a policeman's job."

"It's everybody's job," I told her, "and Nutting has got children of his own and can be trusted to know all your boy's future may turn on what he decides to do."

I warned her to say naught at home for the minute.

"You'd think the first one to know should be Adam," I admitted, "but he won't want his son to begin life as a Borstal boy because

—— made the justices might send him if he comes before them. He will see you're all over the shop, Nelly, when you go home, but he'll suppose that it's saying good-bye to the child, and you can let him think so."

I laid the whole story before John that night and always thought afterwards that he took a very far-reaching and wise line. He had a great power to look at a subject from different angles and figure up the rights and wrongs. If you had been called to judge the sergeant himself on his fine judgments concerning other people, then nobody could have picked a flaw in the man, and he made the affair of the Seebrights as clear as any stickler for justice could wish.

"You need first to measure the crime from the sufferer's viewpoint," he said, "and nobody could quarrel with you for exacting the highest penalty possible; but you, being yourself, don't need to be told vengeance won't bring back the birds. Also it would be contrary to your nature to take vengeance. As he stands he's a filthy little beast of a boy and better dead; but ten years of age is too young to doom a fellow-creature. I can tell Nutting he's confessed and say the law should follow its course, or I can say you have forgiven the child and feel, for his family's sake if not his own, he need not be sent to prison. The inspector will demand a stern punishment, but he may be satisfied if Sammy's family look to that; while there again, when Adam Parsons comes to know, he'll say, as any sane father of a bad boy should say, that for his own salvation a heavy hand must be laid upon his son. But if Nutting agrees not to summons him through his parents, then the question arises how he is to be punished for his own good."

"That clears the air as you were bound to do," I agreed, "and the first question is: who are to hear tell about it? At present only us and his mother know, and she's promised to keep shut. How would it be if nobody else was ever to know, John? Then no need to drag the law in at all."

But he shook his head at that.

"There's no manner of doubt the inspector must know," he assured me. "Nutting's duty is to the law and if we come between a malefactor and the law, then we stand accessory to the crime and are doing wrong ourselves. He must know, but he must also know that you are anxious to keep the business out of public knowledge and have forgiven the wickedness. He never wants to bring a case to court if it can be settled out of court. But Sammy's got to know something also: that his beastly crime has found him out."

"He may even be remorseful, which is a punishment in itself to a tender heart," I suggested. But John laughed at that.

station, where he belonged, but I couldn't do it—God's my judge, I couldn't do it!"

She wept again and I gave her my dry handkerchief.

"You must keep hold of yourself, Nelly, and I'm glad you brought this tale here," I said. "A child will often have a very good motive for doing a disreputable deed. They ain't born with consciences. All Sammy thought upon was for you to win over me and his little mind set to work how you should. There was only one way he could hit upon and because he felt you must win the Cup, he took that way. He never asked himself the wickedness; he only asked himself the danger and he welcomed the danger, because he's born to enjoy danger. My birds stood between you and the Cup and that was enough for him, and they had to go. You must win the Cup: that was the reason for his deed. It wasn't done for hate of my birds, or hate for me."

"He was never one to hate," said Nelly, "though no child ever earned more hate himself."

"His school will teach him you can't do hateful things without being hated," I answered.

"His father will give him in charge when he hears about this," she told me.

"Then don't let him hear for the minute," I advised. "There's the good name of your family and the future of that child. Tell nobody until I've had a talk with John. He is merciful-minded and will know the right line of action."

I calmed her down and made her promise she wouldn't tell Adam, for my feeling now was that John and Inspector Nutting should get together and decide the proper thing to do."

"We'll leave it to the sergeant, Nelly," I said. "A lot of very shameful deeds have been done from high motives, but you shouldn't do evil to one person that good may come to another. The child calls for attention in his character because, if a ten-year-old can do such a cruel, heartless thing, what will he be turning his attention to when he's twenty?"

She prayed again that I might feel it was possible to show mercy.

"There's none else can be expected to show it," she said, "and the inspector's a policeman, and mercy isn't a policeman's job."

"It's everybody's job," I told her, "and Nutting has got children of his own and can be trusted to know all your boy's future may turn on what he decides to do."

I warned her to say naught at home for the minute.

"You'd think the first one to know should be Adam," I admitted, "but he won't want his son to begin life as a Borstal boy because

that's where the justices might send him if he comes before them. He will see you're all over the shop, Nelly, when you go home, but he'll suppose that it's saying good-bye to the child, and you can let him think so."

I laid the whole story before John that night and always thought afterwards that he took a very far-reaching and wise line. He had a great power to look at a subject from different angles and figure up the rights and wrongs. If you had been called to judge the sergeant himself on his fine judgments concerning other people, then nobody could have picked a flaw in the man, and he made the affair of the Seebrights as clear as any stickler for justice could wish.

"You need first to measure the crime from the sufferer's viewpoint," he said, "and nobody could quarrel with you for exacting the highest penalty possible; but you, being yourself, don't need to be told vengeance won't bring back the birds. Also it would be contrary to your nature to take vengeance. As he stands he's a filthy little beast of a boy and better dead; but ten years of age is too young to doom a fellow-creature. I can tell Nutting he's confessed and say the law should follow its course, or I can say you have forgiven the child and feel, for his family's sake if not his own, he need not be sent to prison. The inspector will demand a stern punishment, but he may be satisfied if Sammy's family look to that; while there again, when Adam Parsons comes to know, he'll say, as any sane father of a bad boy should say, that for his own salvation a heavy hand must be laid upon his son. But if Nutting agrees not to summons him through his parents, then the question arises how he is to be punished for his own good."

"That clears the air as you were bound to do," I agreed, "and the first question is: who are to hear tell about it? At present only us and his mother know, and she's promised to keep shut. How would it be if nobody else was ever to know, John? Then no need to drag the law in at all."

But he shook his head at that.

"There's no manner of doubt the inspector must know," he assured me. "Nutting's duty is to the law and if we come between a malefactor and the law, then we stand accessory to the crime and are doing wrong ourselves. He must know, but he must also know that you are anxious to keep the business out of public knowledge and have forgiven the wickedness. He never wants to bring a case to court if it can be settled out of court. But Sammy's got to know something also: that his beastly crime has found him out."

"He may even be remorseful, which is a punishment in itself to a tender heart," I suggested. But John laughed at that.

"He's not that sort and all he's like to be feeling is fear," he answered. "I daresay it shocked him very much to find his mother didn't applaud his work and wasn't on his side. That puzzled him for certain, because he'd think the Bantam Silver Cup was going to be a proper godsend for her. He's got to hear he's found out and have it rubbed in that he's a little blackguard and heading for the gallows; but the question is: who's going to tell him. Some might say his new schoolmaster's the man."

"Not on your life, John!" I cried. "That would queer Sammy's pitch from the start. Let his schoolmaster come to the child with an open mind and the thing is to get the fear of God in the boy so he'll put in a better show at school than he otherwise will do. Somebody has got to dress him down in private. His father's too hard and his mother's too soft and it isn't a woman's job in any case; but it must be one of those who know the truth and that means it must be Inspector Nutting, or you. I'd say it ought to be you, because Nutting would be there in the name of the law and the schoolmaster would smell a rat from the start; but you could go as a family friend and take the child for a walk and let him see where he stands. You won't terrify him out of his wits, but Nutting would."

The sergeant wasn't too sure, however.

"Nutting may agree with you, or he may not," he said. "But he can hear you on the subject before he takes action."

So we proceeded and the next evening John got the inspector to come and see us at home.

I told the story yet again, though properly sick of it by now, and Harry Nutting declared himself as much surprised.

"Surprised and shocked," he said, "because though I well knew Parson's boy to be unruly and overfond of adventures where he'd no rights to enjoy them, I never thought him to be criminal."

"A little more of the old Adam than you counted on, Harry," I suggested. And he had his joke and said that was a libel on Sammy's father.

We talked a lot over what was to be and who was to know, but the inspector didn't want any claims for the honour of the Force, being the soul of fairness.

"We didn't run him down and more did you," he said, "and in truth, if he'd kept his mouth shut, nobody would have run him down; but, like all bad characters, he was vain and wanted to shine before his mother and show what a good son he was to her, caring nothing of what a bad neighbour and a murdering young rip he was to you. And if Nelly Parsons had kept her mouth shut, then we'd have had another mystery and nothing to work on."

"Least said soonest mended no doubt as a rule," agreed John, "but we felt it our duty to let you know the truth, Harry."

"A case where you had the satisfaction of doing right by putting a tricky problem on the back of the law," explained the inspector. "But Mrs. Winter has laid it out very clear and I'm with her that the thing should be kept secret except from those it concerns. His father must hear that the law wasn't deceived and the crime is discovered, but that still leaves the boy and the handling of the boy."

They talked a lot till by good chance I said something that turned out to be fruitful. We reached the point when it was agreed that Harry should tell Adam Parsons the story and John should visit Sammy at school.

"I wonder," I said, "if John could get some definite promise out of the child before you see his father, Harry? Sammy has a great bent for the sea and would run away and join the pirates to-morrow if he knew where to find such people. Perchance, if he could be sent off in a year or two to a training ship, then he'd be as safe as his fellow-creatures could make him."

"Why wasn't it planned then?" asked Nutting. "I should think Adam Parsons would jump at it."

"It was Nelly who never would hear of such a thing," I explained. "Adam would have let him go to sea and cared little enough if he'd never come ashore again; but his mother was all for the first-born taking his rightful place at High Chimneys in due time. She said it was only a child's fancy."

"You've got something there, Pete," said John. "That looks to open a very good way out—eh, Harry?"

Inspector Nutting applauded too.

"Cuts the knot at a stroke," he declared. "For look at it. His mother was the only difficulty you say; but Nelly's in a cleft stick now. If she holds out against me, then I have no choice but to let the facts be known; but, if she agrees then she kills two birds with one stone—satisfies his father and lets him set to work with no cloud upon his name. It's a darned sight better luck than the imp deserves."

I was very pleased for our meeting to take this turn.

"It's very large-minded of you, Harry, to give him such a chance," I said.

"It is," he agreed, "but I've got a feeling, nasty little wretch though he is, that we can give Providence another chance and see what a boatswain's mate will make of him."

And that is how the matter went and even Nelly, when she grasped where she stood, was thankful for his escape and made no more stir against him going to sea as soon as they would take him. Adam

cussed Sammy good and hard after the business came to his ears; but he said such an infamous deed was well inside his son's range.

"May he live it down, Pete," said Adam to me, "and may you be rewarded for your forgiveness. And we have withdrawn our entry for the Bantam Cup, because, if Nelly was to win it after this horror, her first thought would be to put poison in it and drink it off before your eyes!"

As for John, he paid a visit to Sammy's school and told the boy that all was known and he wasn't going to be run in and that he had taken ten years off his mother's life and so on. The child wasted no time about being sorry, because nothing but joy filled his heart to hear he was going to sea and not to prison.

"The only fly in the amber for him was to hear his mother wouldn't compete for the Cup," said John grinning at the recollection. "He was quite quick enough to see that nothing could ever have come out against him if he had not told her what he'd done for her. 'I'm sorry I done it, because it was wasted on mother, and I'll never do a hand's turn for her no more.' That's what he said, and then he laughed and said he was damn glad he'd done it all the same, because it had got him to sea, where he wanted to go with his dying breath. I showed him what a low-minded, cowardly little pig he was, but little he cared. Only thinking of being a sailor now."

"No remorse?" I asked.

"Not a spark, Pete. There's the makings of a very high-class criminal in that child, and if the sea don't scour him clean, nothing will."

We told my foster-daughter about the story next time she came to see me and stop two nights for, though it was always kept a secret from Birch Hanger and every living soul in Beesworthy but us and Inspector Nutting and Sammy's parents, I never kept a secret from Janice in my life and knew it was a human sort of tale to take her fancy and safe as the grave with her.

She thought we had done well and, after her first indignation against the boy, forgave him.

"The Lord tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, whether it's a black one or not," she said. "I've known that happen. It happened to me, Mother."

"You were a white lamb without spot," I reminded her. "So far as he's gone, Sammy Parsons looks to be about as black a lamb as you'll find in any flock."

She always jumped at an excuse to come to me and she put in eight-and-forty hours before she drove home to her house at Dartmouth. She was getting on now but didn't look a shadow different

to my eyes. She had done well in America and liked the Americans and the friendly welcome they gave her. For the minute she had no plans, but was interested in yet another way in which she might reach out to a greater audience than ever before. New inventions were in hand by which folk listening to their machines at home could hear people talking miles and miles away, but though Janice might be heard in this queer manner, of course she remained invisible.

"Lord love you, girl!" I cried. "Once they heard you, who would feel content till they'd seen you?"

But she shook her head at that.

"A very comforting thought not to be seen some day," she said. "Actresses are like flowers: they take a long time in bud but, once they bloom, they are soon over; the petals begin to fall and no one of us is the pride of the bouquet very long. The limelight is as fleeting as dawnlight, or sunset; but our voices last better than our faces and so the 'wireless' lengthens our innings."

"You was never one jealous for the limelight, Janice," pointed out John, "or you might have been in it a lot more than you have been."

"Time sets its own pace and you can't hurry it forward, nor hold it back," she said. "Time is largely a matter of temperament. Some people always have plenty and some never enough."

I agreed with her there, but John took a practical view.

"A day spells twenty-four hours—no less, no more for everybody—to be used or wasted," he told us.

Anyway her two days with us were soon sped, though she visited friends and saw Grace and Prudence at Birch Hanger. She stopped a week at her Dartmouth home, then vanished away into the blue again and back to her world. We had some good talk and, as usual, I felt sorry for her to have missed the joy of a husband and children at her knees. I think sometimes she was sorry for herself. She always showed tenderness to any tale of courting and sadness when it went awry.

"Lovers want so little: only each other," she told me once.

CHAPTER VII

IT was round about this period that I marked my husband showed signs strange to me. He began to grow restless and I thought out of tune—not with me, but circumstances in general. He wasn't satisfied with the government of the country and felt disappointed because they didn't elect him on our local council, or some such

institution. What any man in his senses wants to go upon institutions for, if he can keep off them, I never could understand, but the ambitious and brainy ones often hanker to be elected. In John's case I knew the motive must be worthy of the man, for I'd never found him in all our married life to give utterance to a motive that wasn't praiseworthy. He said that in his opinion the people's liberty was more and more attacked. He mistrusted the "reds" and thought enslavement for the weak was what they were after and the first step would be to make the moneyed classes weak by the simple plan of taking their money away from them.

"That done," said the sergeant, "then they will all collapse together, because, their capital gone, their strength goes with it—that being all the strength they have got, and they become ready for enslavement."

Then he took action, and astonished me by resigning from the regular work at the Manor House. They were very sorry to lose him and puzzled, like a lot of other people, to know why the sergeant had ceased from his usefulness. Some said he was getting lazy and when one day I met Charlie Dickson, he scoffed a bit and said John wanted more petting and less work.

"He pretends he's getting an old man now and needs your attention and the time for rest has come," said Charles.

"Never was a younger man for his age than Winter," I answered, "but the people are apt to forget he has an outstanding brain. It's natural he should call for higher things than tending the general's hot-houses. But a man like him doesn't have to look very far for a welcome, seeing there's nothing he can't do when so inclined."

I also told him that my better half was little satisfied with the signs of the future, and Charlie quite agreed.

"Politics are like the poor, always with us, Pete," he said, "and your view of them is according to how they make or mar your business."

John continued his passion for arithmetic and brought it to bear on money, for that was still his first object of study. He never felt so happy as when engaged upon figures and making calculations. He said that figures were a deal more trustworthy than mouth-speech in any case, because you can twist words to mean more things than one and a clever handler of words will prove that black is white if minded so to do; but with figures, though rascals can cook them and often will, yet they tell no lies in themselves when set down aright. Certainly he got some astonishing results from his powers in this direction. For example there was my old cuckoo clock, said to be made in Switzerland and a wondrous timekeeper. I had heard it calling

out by day and night for more than thirty years and though once the bellows required to be mended, that was the only attention it ever asked for. Well, John, playing with his arithmetic, declared he would tell me how many times the little grey bird had popped out and cried "cuckoo" in the last five-and-twenty years.

"It records the hours according to their number and registers the half-hours also with a solitary call, so there you are: to calculate the total," he said.

"Never will you do it, John," I told him; but he set to work.

"The first fact that emerges is this," he announced. "The blessed clock says 'Cuckoo!' sixty-five thousand, seven hundred times a year. Then you have got to multiply that figure by twenty-five, Pete."

"Wonderful enough in itself," I answered, but he had a greater surprise still in store and presently put down his pencil and spoke again.

"Just to show what extraordinary things happen in everyday life and only to be proved by mathematics," he said, "though what the clock does in a year is remarkable enough, as you say, yet what it has done in twenty-five years fairly beggars your imagination because it takes you into figures beyond the human mind to grasp. We can only get a dim understanding of reality beyond the thousands and a small mind can't even reach so far as them in most cases; but figures soar far beyond thousands and will tell naked truths outside the power of the greatest human mind."

He paused, to make what he was going to say more wonderful, and then told me one of his naked truths.

"Your clock has said 'Cuckoo!'—just those two clear notes—one million, six hundred and forty-two thousand, five hundred times!" he said. "That's twenty-five years' work alone, and Lord knows how many more since it started."

"I can't picture a million," I answered and he said nobody could.

Then I praised him.

"I was always counted pretty spry at figures," I went on, "but I never reached to nothing like that, John. You're a master at them without a doubt."

"That's a trifle," he replied. "When you deal with subjects like astronomy and finance and the National Debt and the spawning of herrings, then your figures certainly call for a great brain to handle them."

But what gave him a lot more satisfaction and led to something of a most far-reaching effect in our own affairs happened over some work John accomplished for his friend, Mr. Hope, the manor head gardener. He had found, much to his satisfaction, that Philip Hope

was as interested in money as himself, and my own opinion is that they often spent a good deal of their time together upon that subject. People have a queer way of finding out whether they harbour a common interest and when they discover such a thing, it draws them together. So John impressed upon Phil the wonders of investments and he got round the old chap, which was a feat in itself, for nobody saved closer than Hope, being a Scot and thrifty from his childhood. But the sergeant brought figures to bear and at last got him to trust one hundred pounds of his savings in rubber, which was a substance of increasing demand all the world over. Hope took John's advice and found himself richly rewarded for doing so, because, in five weeks after Johnny had bought the shares for him, his one hundred pounds had waxed into a hundred and fifty!

He was very pleased about that and so was the head gardener at the manor, and my husband told me that rubber was a God-sent blessing to small capitalists for the moment and if I put my War Loan into it, I'd see the money double inside six months. I didn't feel any itch to be an adventurer, however, and he knew that by now, but I was glad to pay him back for all his goodness where I could, so made him a present and told him it was a gift and he could serve it how he liked.

"My money's yours, Johnny, as well you know," I said, "but lying in my name and me signing upon the dividends makes you feel belike that you have no high interest in it. But now I'm going to give you a hundred out of the money in my account at the bank, and you can see if you fare as well for yourself as you did for Philip."

He thanked me and handling that hundred pounds gave him a deal of pleasure. But the matter didn't stop there, because it led to remarkable developments little to be foreseen by me. When he reported how rubber continued to run upwards and how his hundred was a hundred and twenty-five and still waxing, he put me in mind of my money in general and raised a point which looked on the way to solving certain problems.

"A bit ago," he said, "you told me in your big-hearted way that what was yours was mine, Pete, and my heart warmed to such a wife; but turning that over and with my understanding of the subject, I felt things might happen under the present laws to cause you a lot of pain some day."

"We can't help the laws, Johnny," I said, "painful though they may be, but there isn't no law to change my last will and testament which leaves you my house and my money, save for a legacy to my two nephews."

"You go to the point and state the facts as you always do when

you know them," he answered, "and those are the facts; but that brings us to the law of the matter, and the law can do just what you think it cannot and come between you and your last will and testament. Under the wicked laws, Pete, if you went before I do, which God forfend, you wouldn't leave me your War Loan nor yet this house, because death duties and a sum most likely running to four figures would be subtracted from your estate. There are vampire laws set upon us now which rob the dead and laugh at their wills."

"A very shocking thing, I'm sure, and if you tell me so, no doubt it's true and a disgrace to the nation," I agreed, "but I don't see we can do anything about it, my dear."

"If we could do nothing about it, I shouldn't have touched the subject," he answered, "and even though we can do something about it, I should have said nothing, because it's a mighty delicate business and I'd rather be dumb for the rest of my life than utter a word that could be misunderstood by you."

"Never a man made his meaning clearer than what you do, John," I replied.

"And the same with you," he assured me, "and that's why I continue. It lies in your power to see those who inherit your money shall not be bilked by the State, and to do so one thing must guide your actions. You must feel absolute and complete trust in the party to inherit; but absolute trust in any fellow-creature is so passing rare that none can blame you if you don't feel like that even though the fellow-creature happens to be me."

"Of course I trust you," I said. "Would I be your wife, John, if I hadn't, and what have you ever done, or could do, to make me feel my trust was mistook?"

"Nothing I should hope, my love, for the man who could wrong you, in word or deed, would be worse than a man," said he. "So here it stands. If you will, you can perform an act that ensures the situation and safeguards your money and all else. Your capital is sacred and will bide where it is—in the War Loan—because so ordained. Though I may have mourned the fact that it doesn't return what it should do, I always respected your decision about that. But it lies in your power, if so you please, to transfer the War Loan from your name into mine—the only difference being that I sign the dividends instead of you. In that case, after three years have passed, the capital won't go into your estate at all and the cruel loss be escaped."

I felt a silly longing for dear Simon Townley to be alive again to hear the suggestion, but had no real doubts this was a very clever idea.

"What are you telling about three years?" I asked.

"The law again. The law decrees that three years must pass before the transfer is good. You'd be called to carry on for that length of time, and after that no further anxiety. Needless to say I wouldn't press such a course upon you and if by ill hap you didn't weather the three years, then the money would be lost. In that awful case little should I care, for what's your money to me if you were not here to handle it? But if you'd feel wishful to save a thousand or so without turning a hair, that's the way you can."

"And if all went well, John, and the three years passed safely by and then fate should ordain you went instead of me, where am I then? Nothing less likely than that could overtake me, but fate is very apt to deal in the unlikely."

"You're right and wise to ask," he said, "and for my part I'd much rather that would happen and I was the first to be called. But then the death duties would be taken out before the bulk of it would return to you. I haven't made a will up to now, because my pension dies with me and I've got nothing to leave; but if you decided to take such a course, then I should write a will at once leaving everything I'd got, lock, stock and barrel, back to you. There's nobody else in my world but you as you well know."

We chatted about it for a while and finally he begged me to take another opinion on the subject and ask the successor to Mr. Townley how the suggestion struck him. John didn't know the gentleman, but heard good accounts of him at Kingsbridge, so, next time I was up there, I called in and found him a very pleasant man. Most of our talk was about the dear old lawyer, for he had known Mr. Townley well and was pleased to hear what I could tell about him, and then, when we came to my reason for calling, Mr. Evans—that was his name—said much the same as the sergeant and agreed it was purely a question of trust and the situation would be just as my husband had described.

"If Mr. Winter is a tidy bit younger than you," he said, "and assuming your faith and confidence in him to be absolute, then I can see no objection. Death duties, in the event of your decease, would not amount to a thousand pounds I should imagine and your War Loan is all the capital you possess; but the transfer, at the expiration of three years would represent a little saving of course, and conversely, if he died first, then a little loss."

Then Mr. Evans went off into a long story how a very rich and titled man, a client of his own, had hated the death duties as much as the sergeant did and how he had transferred a big fortune to his son in his own lifetime. He was seventy-five when he did so and

good for another ten years with luck, and he was in fact living still; but his son, a man in the forties, broke his neck out fox-hunting five years after the arrangements had been made and his death duties were called for; and now, when the rich old man went home, they'd be called for all over again."

"Be that as it may, Mr. Evans," I told him, "there is no fear of my husband breaking his neck in the hunting field, or in any place else. He fought and faced death through the Great War and got a medal by it, but he hasn't any intentions to face death again till it comes to him in his bed."

So I paid Mr. Evans his fee and told him the sergeant should call and the matter be put in hand, along with John's will, which he would be called to make once the War Loan was in his name.

And meanwhile his flutter in rubber went very favourably and next time he visited Torquay, where he'd go now and again to see an old soldier friend, he bought me a lot of needless luxuries that ran into three pounds and more, including a spacious hot-water bottle for night work against the cold feet I was wont to lament.

"Now, instead of your hot brick, you'll have a bit of my rubber property to show you its value," he said, and there's no doubt I got very fond of the invention from the first and slept the better for it. Before another winter I bought Grace Blanchard an equally fine specimen, and though she protested, never being one for comforts, she found herself much the gainer like I had. She was my oldest living friend now and not the woman she had been, but happy in her sons and in her grandchildren—Norton's youngsters.

It looks to be a curious thing, when you are up in years and turning your mind over the past as I am called to do now, pen in hand, that memory plays tricks with you and will often summon up the far past clear and vivid even to the buttons on the coat of a dead man, or how a long-deceased woman was apt to dress her hair, yet, when your desire is to remember what fell out five or six years ago, you can't call home the details about it. Now there stretches out four years before I come to the climax of my whole life and the fantastical affairs that lay in store; but, though a deal must surely have happened during those years in Beesworthy, nothing overtook myself but peaceful contentment with John.

"To hear you count your blessings, Pete, you'd think you must be the luckiest woman ever God made"—so the sergeant said to me one night when I was running over them. Then he strove to strike a balance and show how there was a lot on the debit side and I overlooked many a hard facer.

"Contentment is your other name," he told me, "and I hope,

Pete, you'll die as well content with your innings as you have lived. A puzzle to me."

"No doubt men and women will go on puzzling each other till the end of time, as they always have done, Johnny," I replied.

There was nothing particular joyful in the happenings that stand out during this period for, when you reach near to your allotted span, the stories and memories of those around you at your prime have mostly ended in the churchyard, and next it was my dear sister-in-law, Grace Blanchard, that dropped out. Seventy-four she was when she went, but never of much great fighting power. Grace was born a Belworthy. Her family were very nearly extinct by now and such as remained found themselves too far away to come to the funeral when we laid her beside Aaron. Her children, Barnaby and Norton, were chief mourners and I walked after them with Norton's wife, Prudence. Adam Parsons, and Nelly, his wife, followed us. Little they thought, poor souls, how soon the pair of them would be there again—as chief mourners next time. For a cruel stroke was brewing up at High Chimneys and in the following October month it fell.

Adam greatly loved mushrooms and had good store in his own meadows, with enough also for market in large quantities besides. That was the cause of the downfall, because his youngest, a sharp little fellow near six years old, heard all the talk at home and got to understand how his daddy gloated on the things, so, poking about as he was wont to do, the child found some big, showy toadstools and, thinking to delight his father, fetched in with his pinafore half full of them. Nelly made a great fuss about his cleverness, of course, and said how proud daddy would be for such a fine gift when he came home. She had just put her lamb to bed and flung his toadstools out of harm's way when the child was taken ill and screamed out for her, and she rushed to him and found him terribly bad. He managed to tell her he had eaten one of the toadstools himself and she did what she might. They had set up a telephone at the farm but a few weeks earlier and poor Nelly thanked God for it and called up Doctor Tanner; but he didn't get there in time to save the little boy because he had poisoned himself fatally and Tanner said nothing could have saved him. When he saw the poisonous toadstools, he knew there was little hope for a small child, and though he worked valiantly and did all he knew, the babe died on his hands. So there was cruel gloom at High Chimneys for many a long day and another molehill in the churchyard.

I spent a lot of time with Nelly Parsons after her bereavement and made much of her remaining children; but, with Sammy at sea by this time and her last one gone to earth for evermore, she was a

desolate creature; while, as for Adam, he cursed his Maker and his heart was hardened like Pharaoh's in the Bible; but he did one thing which brought some strange, left-handed comfort to his wife. His great woe acted no doubt to lessen her own; but more than that: despite the man's famous lust for mushrooms, he was never known to eat another and none dare name them again in his hearing. A melancholy affair and John said at the time to me that folk who would let a baby wander alone where showy toadstools grew were asking for it; but of course he never breathed such an opinion to them.

Which sad incident reminds me that, about now, there began to be the talk of a cemetery for the parish, because our sacred ground was as nearly full as it would hold. I was safe myself, having long years ago, when Micah died, bought the plot beside him; but the time had come to take steps and the reverend Tozer, now in sight of retirement, wished to see a space acquired and all made decent and in order for the purpose before he left Beesworthy. They couldn't extend the Yard, as they manage to do in some places, and the cemetery was going to lie best part of a mile from church and have a proper burying chapel of its own. All calling for thought and money. The sergeant always held out for cremation, which was a growing hobby among the bettermost people. He said that being a desperate small island in truth, England devoted far too much of her limited space to the business of interment and that thousands and thousands of acres of good land were denied to agriculture. Sir Anthony Balmain was setting a very good example by letting it be known far and wide how he ordained to be cremated after death and not stored in his family vault; but most of us, myself among them, turned against any such violence, and many good Christians went so far as to say it was doubtful religion. I remember old Caroline Drewe, the baker's grandmother and ninety-three years of age when she said it.

"I'm entitled to my six feet of earth and a sizeable mound," she told me, "and I will have 'em."

And when she died, two years after that, they opened the new cemetery with Caroline. "Strange to think a woman who loved company as she did, should find herself so lonely," I told John as we returned from the funeral.

"There's none so patient as the dead," he said. "She can afford to wait and plenty will flock round her as the time speeds."

So my climax year crept upon me, stealthy as the rising tide to a seaside wanderer thinking of no such thing until he finds himself cut off. A week or two before it happened, when another autumn was slipping into another winter—on All Saints' Day to be exact—

I spoke to John of a resolution that had gained ground upon my thoughts of late. We were standing looking at my Amherst pheasants at the moment when I spoke.

"It's borne in upon me very strongly of late, John," I said, "to be done with fancy poultry and turn my attention to more serious matters. I'm grown too old for toys nowadays and shouldn't spend so much time amusing myself. I've had my fill of birds and it's foolish to carry on, and selfish too. They cost money and take up a lot of my mind, which ought to be turned on something more useful."

"Do I hear you, Pete?" he asked standing quite still and staring at me. "Not on your life, my girl! Everything you do and everything you say is serious to me, and I wouldn't have you turn down your birds for twice the expense of them."

"Why not, Johnny?" I inquired. "Birds aren't everything."

"Listen and let me point out a side of the subject you haven't weighed up," he answered. "If you gave over keeping and breeding choice birds, there would come a parlous gap into your existence and you'd be called to ask yourself what could fill it. But you'd look very far, Pete, before you got any answer to that."

"I'd fill it with you, Johnny," I said, and a queer look came into his eyes for half a moment.

"Don't deceive yourself," he said, "and never imagine that I'm one quarter so needful to your scheme as you think. You must school your thoughts to believe, as a dead certain fact, that no person is vital to another person. You have found that out yourself for that matter. Human nature isn't built so and, if I was gone out of your life for one reason or another, you would be the first to see when you got used to it, the space I had taken could be put to better purpose."

"What on God's earth are you talking about?" I asked him and felt myself go pale as a sheet of paper; but he didn't answer and ran on about the fowls.

"Look at all the hours they take you by your high standards of perfection. Imagine the hen-runs empty, the garden with never a call or a crow, and all the colours of the rainbow gone out of your pens. And what have you got instead? Nothing at all. You're no reader; you're not a great one for exercise; you haven't been wishful to go a sea-trip once this summer and never travelled farther than Janice's house to visit her. You're tired of the gramophone and who shall blame you for that? I tell you, with all the force I can put into speech, my dear woman, that to go off your birds would be fatal to your health and contentment. And I beg you not to dream of anything so rash. I'd hate like hell to picture you without them."

Never, in all my memory had I seen the sergeant so put about!

"Enough said I'm sure, Johnny," I replied to him after he stopped talking and wiped his face with his handkerchief, where perspiration had broken upon it. "Goodness knows I don't want to do anything you'd condemn so serious as all that."

"For your own sake I speak, not for mine," he answered. "I look ahead further than you do, Pete."

Then I laughed.

"You talk as if you were going to die, my love," I said. "It's either that, or you really care for the birds as much as I do."

He smiled when I laughed, but it was a queer smile and I felt, in some odd, almost creepy fashion, that what I had spoken amused him in quite a different way from how it had amused me to say it.

"We won't talk of death," he replied very earnestly. "In fact Lord knows what we are talking about at all."

"If you feel the end of the world will come in sight for me when I part company from them, why, then I won't, John. I promise," I replied.

"You'll never live to regret that promise, Pete," he assured me and changed the subject.

Soon afterwards he went to put in a week-end with his soldier-friend at Torquay, who was failing now and wishful to see him.

"I've always liked him for his opinions and his patience and courage to go on living with one leg shot away," he said.

"You've been a very good, faithful friend to the man," I reminded him.

"I was never one to make close friends and no more was he," answered John. "Yet sometimes unsociable people find they suit each other better than the run of folk. Few have got the art to carry such a pack of friends as you can do."

I put his things in his travelling bag and he caught the omnibus for Dartmouth to take train for Torquay. The last thing I said to him was to mind and buy me a packet of silver-coloured hairpins, which was a standby of mine and not to be bought anywhere else in my knowledge.

"I've told Barnaby to stock them for his shop time and again," I said. "And he always forgets; but don't you."

He was full just then of buying a little runabout motor-car for the coming winter and before he came home, meant to put the order in hand. He'd long learned to drive and was going to use the money he had made out of his rubber shares for the purpose. On a Friday he went and the next Tuesday, or Wednesday would return.

"I might drive back in our own car for a surprise," he had said

the night before, "but don't count upon it, because they are hardly likely to have just what I want in the shop."

On the Saturday I went up to Birch Hanger for my dinner and, despite the welcome always to be won from Prudence and Norton and the old hands, my old home was a naked shell now. The old dispensations had passed and the changes only served to bring the dead to mind. Nothing marked them so much as the way Prudence brought up her three youngsters against the methods my mother had applied to her family. But Norton was not a man to run to welcome change and Birch Hanger itself showed fewer in three generations than many such ancient holdings.

They were just bringing in the roots up there at that time and I went to see them at it and chatter with one or two of the oldest hinds still working for us. There was talk about Luke Caunter rising to be Norton's head man before so very long, for he had proved himself of high quality and a tower of strength, and so had Dolly, his wife. Luke was helping with the swedes when I went out on the land, and I held him in talk for five minutes and congratulated him on a kind thing he had done. He happed to have a widowed aunt—an ancient woman as hard and crusty and dour in her way as Mercy Gollop in the far past, but not so prosperous as she. Exceedingly poor and utterly friendless was Luke's aunt and now in sight of the union workhouse in her late seventies—a cruel age to become so. And Luke, out of his good heart, had run to the rescue and was lending a hand to keep the old lady in her cottage and independent. He hadn't told anybody, but his wife had told my little maid, Mary, and she had told me, so I praised him up for it.

"A very proper, Christian thing, Luke," I said, "and if you don't live to be rewarded here, then you surely will hereafter."

He shrugged his shoulders and gave his faint, woolly laugh, like a ship's siren in a fog.

"'Twas this way, Mrs. Winter," he explained. "I waited and marked time for ten years, to watch if her Maker would turn a trick for my Aunt Pincombe before it was too late; but seemingly He hadn't any more use for her than anybody else. So I done according to my conscience and gave the poor soul a lift."

"And how did she take it, Luke?" I asked and the cowman's mild, shining eyes sparkled on me.

"Like you let down medicine," he said.

When we were eating our dinner an hour later, Prudence told me that Mr. Tozer was thought to be preaching his farewell sermon on the following day, and some words she let fall reminded me of long ago.

"The new vicar is to be inducted come presently," said Prudence,

"and it's hoped that he will do something about the congregations falling off such a lot as they look to be doing, Aunt Pete."

"I'm old enough," I answered, "to mind how, when Mr. Tozer came here, my mother, at this table, said she hoped he'd draw in the young people because the attendances was dwindling. Fifty years ago that was."

Then Norton spoke.

"So long as my wife and children bide good Christians, I shan't take no odds of it," he said, and I had my last laugh for many a long day.

"You're as bad as the labouring man who prayed to God to watch over him and his wife and his two children—'us four, no more,'" I told my nephew and his wife also admonished him.

"The selfishness, Norton!" she cried out.

CHAPTER VIII

NOT till Tuesday morning did the sergeant give a sign and I counted surely to see him during the day, so felt surprise to receive a letter from him. Two letters reached me and Mary fetched them in and set them at my elbow as I sat down to breakfast. The writing was familiar enough in both cases for one came from John and the other from Janice. She was back in America and a long time had passed since I set eyes on her and I grew discontented when that happened. I just looked at the foreign stamp and set it aside, ordaining to enjoy it after my breakfast; but I turned at once to my husband's and, strange as it may sound, I never opened the other at all that day. And I never ate a mite of breakfast either.

As I handled a matter of eight sheets writ in his big hand and on both sides of the paper, I marvelled to know why he had poured such a spate of information upon me, though due to return himself a few hours after I got it. However the answer to that lay in my hands and he made himself as clear as usual—in such a monstro us letter as no man had ever sent to a woman before, I should think.

This is what he told me copied down word for word, because I kept the letter for an heirloom.

"My dear Pete,

"You are going to be a good bit astonished to get this from me and still more so to find what it's about; but no man is stronger than his character and, soon or late, our nature conquers against all odds.

"I will call your attention first to a conversation we once had upon this subject and a remark you made. Speaking of people in general

you said to me, 'You can't judge of the light from the candlestick, Johnny, and a poor candlestick may hold a very fine flame.' And I agreed. 'In the Army,' I said, 'some of the best-looking men were the worst—so much so that I always felt a doubt of any uncommon handsome chap—while plenty mean-looking, cheap fellows were worth their weight in gold.' 'You had a good character and fine appearance both,' you said in your kindly fashion, and I granted I was personable to the eye, but found qualities rooted in my nature that often left me guessing. 'I can read other people better than I can read myself,' I told you, and declared how you were a lot clearer to my understanding than I was myself. 'Because you pay more heed to me than you do to yourself,' you answered you can safely leave your character in my hands.' Little you knew!

"The truth is that circumstances have now fallen out where my character has declared itself so fierce that I must cast aside pretences and reveal myself to your eyes. Money and how to come by it was always my guiding star, being built that way, and the fact led me to suffer a great many disappointments, because I had no impulse to dishonesty and my efforts were all straight and all failed. But I have never acted outside the law, or done a deed to put me in reach of it. I knew all about your financial position in Micah's days and I regretted his opinions and wished he would let me handle his money for his own advantage. That was years before I dreamed of what the future held. But, with him in his grave, my affections turned on you and it looked as though I was presented with two things, a good wife, which I never thought to win, and five thousand pounds to turn into ten thousand most likely with my own great gifts, and then double that again. For, along with my ruling passion for money, I possessed the bent of mind and accomplishments to treat it right once I got enough to name.

"But I'd wish you to be clear as to one thing and understand that my affection for you was genuine and I have always been devoted to you and full of admiration for you. And, if I had not been a born financier, our lives would have gone on for evermore in peace and contentment. I don't say that I would have tried to win you if I had not known you were a woman with good money, but the fine experience of being your husband made me more content than ever I had been until the ruling instincts of my life came uppermost at full strength and I felt that something had got to be done about it, because it grew to a proper agony for me to see all your money mouldering and hid in a napkin, when it might blossom and grow to riches. However, the dead hand stood between and, though I feel very sure you would have been willing for me to make your fortune,

you had Micah's orders in that matter and so I couldn't do anything about it at the time. Then the way was made easy and the money fell into my lap. You ordained for me to inherit it and so my wits went to work and I availed myself of the laws governing money and, when three years were gone, the War Loan became my property and I faced the world a man of capital.

"I want you to bear in mind that I should never have taken this step if it threatened to alter your own manner of living, or robbed you to any extent whatsoever. It does not, for you have the Birch Hanger folk behind you and, much more than them, because your foster-daughter is a really rich woman and you are and will always be a million times more to her than art, or money, or anything else. You're safe in every respect and, in addition to the old safety and security unchanged, you will have the dignity of being alone without a man to worry you and demand attention. And keep this in your mind also. Though by your own wish your capital was handed over to me, not for a moment do I pretend you have not an interest in it as great as my own. So, when the day comes that I can return you five thousand pounds, you may expect with utmost confidence to receive it with interest. Impress that upon your family and Janice and trust me to keep my word. The money will return, but I shall not return, because to do so would be contrary to any wish of yours after you read this letter. So the money will come back one day as a token that I never forget what it was to have a rare wife, nor bate of my gratitude to her.

"The times are rich with opportunity to make money if you are long-sighted enough to do so and, though our leaders are as yet too blind to see that Germany is going for another war, financiers like myself are not. If you know well in advance that war must come, then you know what will be wanted most when it does and can operate accordingly.

"You will notice this letter reaches you from London, not Torquay In sober truth my old soldier friend passed away two years ago; but I kept up the pretended visits to Torquay, though in reality it was to London I went. And nothing could be gained, even if you wanted to find me, because the only thing to be brought against me would be desertion.

"So good-bye, dear Pete, and God bless you, and believe that I shall miss you a lot more than you are going to miss me.

Your faithful friend and well-wisher,

Sergeant John Winter.

"*P.S.*—I have changed my name, but my real name is John Winter, so you are all right in that respect."

It was quite a while before I took in this letter, for sometimes, if you don't want to make sense of a bit of news, you deny yourself the power to do so; but in about ten minutes I realised I was a left woman and my husband had found my money too much for him. Little things always squeeze into the mind at great moments, like a robin singing in a thunderstorm, and one of the first that intruded upon me was John's recent advice that I should cling to my birds and my promise to do so. He had known what was in store, yet could spare a thought on my account—just a speck of softness in that terrible hard heart. His letter represented between the lines a glimpse of the man I remembered and fancied I had known inside out. The things I did know of him were genuine and, being so, you might have thought were impossible against the things I now knew. And that fact for a while kept me quite calm, just blankly puzzling how one man's soul could have held a tender and considerate partner and a wicked-to-God 'financier.' I came to the strange conclusion that every word of his letter was true and that, in a manner of speaking, he'd done an act of grace to write it. He could have vanished at any time, once his object was gained, and put all England between us, or got across the Channel before I missed him, or feared trouble; but no: he had been at these pains to write full particulars of his deviations and had told me everything it was proper for me to know. I even believed he would send my money back if ever he found himself in a position to do it; though, despite his trust in his own gifts, I never felt confident he would be in such a position. The money was the least part of the loss for I had long looked upon it as his; but now came down upon me the fact that John—my Johnny—was sped for good and all and gone as far away as my Tom in the deep sea and Micah in his grave. I knew what the people would say and expect me to feel: that it was a merciful riddance and, but for the grace of Heaven, he might have murdered me for my money long since; but there was his letter showing that, though off and away to fulfil the cravings of a life-time, he still thought amiably upon me and knew I should live in comfort with good friends around me so long as I lasted. He had deserted me and that was a very monstrous line of conduct, but I believed him when he said that he would never have done so if my future safety was threatened. No doubt also it was his honest opinion that I should get over the parting as quickly and easily as himself. That was where he couldn't see into my character as deep as he thought he could; but he was right again when he said that, after his wickedness, he was the last thing on earth ever I should want back. Miss him—yes at every turn—but want him back—never.

I suffered twenty-four hours to pass and then arose the need to let my situation be known. What folk would say I knew and pretty soon decided to do nothing myself at all. In plain truth I didn't see there was anything I could do. I felt a wish that it might all be passed over without any stir and I could just go on as usual, but that was impossible, because a man can't desert his wife and vanish off the map without exciting attention.

It was needful to pull myself together and go out and tend my birds, which I did, and then determined to keep shut about my downfall till another day had passed. So I carried on and lay low that day, and it wasn't till the night fell on me and I got off to my chamber that nature conquered me. Then, in my lone bed, a wave of despair over-got me and, after midnight I broke loose and suffered for the first time in my life from a wild hysteria. I screamed and I laughed like a hyena that's found something dead in the desert; I bellowed, and my maiden, woke by the din, thought somebody was cutting my throat and rushed in as brave as you please to save me. She carried a candle and the light steadied me a bit. I heaved and panted and told Mary to go down and make me some tea and said 'twas a nightmare. And she was thankful to hear it and had much ado to help breaking down herself.

"'Twas something you took to your supper, Mrs. Winter," she said.

"No, my love, it was something I took before breakfast," I answered and went off howling again. Then she bolted to fetch the tea and I had time to get myself in hand before she came back. When she did so, I felt a whim to tell her the news. So little Mary Caunter was the first in all Beesworthy to hear it after I had.

"The sergeant's gone, Mary," I said. "He's left me, my dear, and you'll never see him again and more shall I."

It was interesting in a way to mark how my words affected her. I'd never seen the child angered, for anger was not in her nature, and at first she wouldn't believe it and thought I was in my nightmare still; but when I drank some tea and my voice was steady and my breathing quiet, I made it clear that she heard nothing but the truth and that John had deserted me and was gone from my side for evermore. Then her face grew red and her eyes, like her father's, bright and mild, flashed with indignation.

"The beastly man! The wicked man!" she cried out. "I hope they'll soon catch him and bring him back to his shame, Mrs. Winter."

"No, child," I said, "they won't catch him and who the mischief is like to want him if they did?"

But her anger it was that interested me for the moment, because

if such a quiet, innocent lass could grow hot about it, what would men and women and the bettermost people feel to hear such a shabby piece of work had overtaken the parish? It wasn't a circumstance you could pretend didn't matter, for the sergeant had long become a common object of Beesworthy.

I told my nephews on the following day and Norton hadn't much to remark; but he didn't mince words in his opinion of John and assured me that I need feel no alarms as to my future.

"You are the last of the old generation, Aunt Pete," he said, "and will be treated according. You can look to me to support you in your house, seeing he couldn't take that away with him, and you can trust me also to give the dog a damned good hiding, if ever I get the chance."

He felt outraged and terrible astonished also, for he was one that always thought my husband to be a virtuous man without any vices hid in him; but Barnaby took a different line. He had always hated John and hated my marrying him, and he got a sort of left-handed satisfaction from finding his opinions proved correct In fact he was so pleased with being fully justified, that he didn't find much time to be sorry for me. He didn't make no offer to help me over the stile as Norton had done and all he advised was for me to see the lawyer, Mr. Evans, and hear how the law stood. Such things matter little enough looked back upon, but the kindness of my neighbours was an eye-opener to me and if I'd lost the sergeant by death, they couldn't have been more attentive, or their sympathy more genuine. It comforted me to hear their affection for me, which I never had dreamed about, and while some thought to pleasure me by heaping damnation on the sergeant, a few here and there, were so tender and understanding that they never so much as named John himself for good or ill.

I wrote out the whole story for Janice, when my hand was steady enough to do so and my mind composed. Indeed I do believe I was the first to calm down in all Beesworthy, for the affair raised a lot of feeling and there were them who would have man-handled my husband if he had appeared in our midst any time for months afterwards. A few revived the tale that he was just the sort of man to hide a lunatic wife in an institution and that I never had been his lawful partner at all. Charlie Dickson always said so, and Bob Mason did the same. In fact Bob urged upon me to drop the name of Winter altogether and return to my name of Widecombe; but I always felt confident I was his lawful partner.

To please Barnaby I visited Mr. Evans and laid the whole story

before him together with my views. He was very definite and agreed for the most part with me.

After much regretting John had proved himself a bad hat, he summed up:

"One can see what the man did," said Mr. Evans. "He sold his War Loan when it was full of dividend and, of course, the half-yearly dividend due on first of December won't appear. He may have sold it in a lump, or scattered it among various brokers to sell for him. That much might be ascertained; but what he did with the money we don't know, or what he has done with himself. He is not likely to have made any slip, because he had unlimited time to perfect his operations and was a very astute sort of man. How to treat him in the event of discovery and capture——"

I stopped Mr. Evans at this point.

"Excuse me, but I don't want him either discovered or captured," I said. "The law has no power to make me take him back and though deserted by Sergeant Winter, I am not deserted by my people. It's a case for keeping your dignity, Mr. Evans, and the least said the soonest mended."

He agreed and looked glad to hear it. The gentleman was not a fighter, like some lawyers, and didn't want to put up a battle-front.

Little by little I removed all traces of John Winter from my dwelling-house, though, when you've abode with a man in close companionship for years and years, it is a long task to do so. Also a painful task in many cases, and some widows I have known, when their man was taken, have felt the very ashes of his last pipe were sacred. They have kept a lingering respect and even love for the signs around them and hated to move a cup, or maybe a glove, or a walking-stick, from its old place. But, though I knew that feeling well enough in the past, it didn't touch me on this occasion and while there were plenty of signs and tokens of John round about, I found myself in a mood to pounce upon them and remove them as quickly as possible. I was glad, in a manner of speaking, that I had reached to steadfast opinions unaided and could take a bird's-eye view before Janice got back to me; but come she did the moment her foot touched land, and, by then, I could meet her in a seemly frame of mind. She kissed me and strained me to her bosom as usual and I could see her lovely eyes waiting to mark what expression must be put upon her face after she had gazed upon mine; and I kissed her back and smiled upon her and shed never a tear save one of thankfulness to see her safe and sound.

"Yes, my darling," I said, "I'm grown old by leaps and bounds, but none the worse for that. I'm quite all right and at peace and

carrying on with my life and standing up to the situation and much as usual. And now talk about yourself."

But she found little to say about herself, though a great deal as to my shocking experience and the mystery that still hung over it in her mind.

"I still can hardly believe it's true, Mother," she said after hearing the particulars. "I feel as if I was listening to some piece of a stage play. He was such a forthright, cleanly, straight sort of man with a character that always seemed to match his handsome face. And yet a cold-blooded, cruel, calculating knave all the time. You wouldn't have thought one skin could have hidden two such opposite creatures—except in a play."

"Something like that passed through my own mind when I surveyed where I stood at first and thought upon him, Janice," I answered, "but I reached firm ground presently by looking at the matter from his point of view."

"The difficulty is to know what to believe about him. After this you feel all the trustworthy, pleasant side of him was a sham—that he was acting all the time and we only know the abominable truth of him now," she said. But I corrected her there.

"You've read his letter," I reminded her. "You've read his letter and you can take it from me that what he wrote was mainly true. We are all two people in a manner of speaking, and depend on the sort of temptations life presents to us from day to day and year to year which we put first. You need to balance our temptations against our failings, Janice. Some saints are never tempted and so they never fall; but most folk are subject to the particular temptation proper to their natures. The Devil looks after that. No doubt to conquer temptation is a grander piece of work than never to feel it; so the only thing for outsiders to do is to praise the winners and forgive the losers."

"You were not an outsider: you were a victim and a martyr," she declared.

"Not on a bird's-eye view," I pointed out to her. "There's his side and, though I grant his wickedness, you must bear in mind his character and the fatal passion to come by money. That man loved me. There's some things nobody can act. I know men and I know there was love for me in Winter—the true thing manifest in a great many ways. You can imitate love up to a point, but there are some tokens you can't imitate. He loved me and if I had been finer stuff I might even have made him love me better than his ruling passion; but I wasn't fine enough for that and doubtless it would have took an outstanding woman to do it. The sergeant was just a hopeful

happening in my long life. He saw possibilities about my money and counted to have it his own way presently; but meantime he got to love me for myself and made the fact so clear that not a spark of suspicion ever wakened in my mind. But there was the money he'd played for and his dreadful hunger to close on it, and after he had done so, it ran away with him and conquered him. So he grabbed it and went back into the unknown with what he had yearned for all his life. Now his great gifts will come into action and, no doubt, he'll die a rich old man; and I'm sorry for him, my love, just as much as I'm sorry for myself, because he's going to suffer presently and he's going to miss me presently, too."

Janice stared to hear my opinions and, though it was generally the other way round and she puzzled me, this time I puzzled her, same as I had puzzled my relations.

"There's not much comfort in that, dear Mother," she said, and then asked a question.

"Do you honestly believe he will send back your five thousand if he doubles it?"

"I believe every word he wrote," I said.

Janice reflected and her quick mind ran on to make a story of it, because she always saw real life turning into a stage play.

She picked up the letter and read a few words at the end.

"He says, 'So good-bye and God bless you and believe that I shall miss you a lot more than you are going to miss me.' Do you believe that too, Mother?"

"Yes, my precious girl, I believe that, too," I told her.

Janice stopped a fortnight and was full of loving kindness and thoughts for the future. In the first place she made it clear I must not waste a single thought on money at any time. She would have loved me to go and live with her, but was much too clever to make any such suggestion, well knowing I should be lost out of Beesworthy. But cash was naught to her and her own tastes only ran to trifles.

"You always said in the past that the Lord loveth a cheerful taker just as well as a cheerful giver," she said, "and now you have got to show that wasn't nonsense."

Time passed; the nine days' wonder died and I remember, six months later, finding my little maiden busy knitting at a sailor's jersey.

"My, Mary!" I said, well knowing all the time the answer. "Who might that be for I wonder?"

She coloured up and smiled at me and her face was pretty when she smiled.

"For Bill Bennett, Mrs. Winter," she said.

"Of course—as if I didn't know, child," I replied

She was tokened to one of our inshore fishermen's sons, and the jersey took me back, back over long years, just showing how human life is much like a squirrel going round and round in his cage, always on the bustle and getting no forwarder.

I looked at the girl's work: very good wool, but not such work as I had knit into the last for Tom he was never to wear.

One other memory rises up. I can mind, when I went back to church again after the sergeant's departure, that dear Prudence, in her nice delicate way, suggested I'd do well to take the gay flowers off my Sunday bonnet and wear a pinch of purple, if not actual black.

"Good Lord, girl!" I said. "I won't display signs of defeat at such a time as this. Better to put the Union Jack of England in my bonnet and show the people my heart is still high."

CHAPTER IX

A CHILDLESS widow often lives an empty life, feels that she has missed fire and comes to a mile-stone all alone with nobody to want her any more, or heed her going. But for me the sting of being childless had long passed away and I never did look at myself as a barren woman when I thought upon Janice. I was proud in her—not for her fame so much as for the fact she loved me and set me so high; because to be loved by anybody a long way superior to myself awoke a sensation that I must be of account to make her feel that way. But now, about eighteen months after John was wiped out of my life, there came a time when my girl—girl no more now—wrote to say she was in want of rest and ordained to come to me for a bit. Which she did do and I could not but note changes that asked to be understood Like most folk, she wearied now and again of her work. Not of art, because art was her life and "the excuse for her existence" as she would say; but for the details. She was restless; she had grown tired of her beautiful house on the cliffs nigh Dartmouth and, after going to perform in the South of France one winter, she had fallen in love with a place called Mentone and, but for me, felt minded to make her home out there.

Art may be your religion and I think it came to be hers, for never a wondrous character lived up to her art so faithfully; but when she came this time there were signs that her spirit wasn't content and that age began to leave a shadow on her beautiful mind as well as her beautiful body. A right-down sad look would come into her eyes

sometimes, when silence had fallen between us. It seemed to me in a queer fashion that we'd changed places, and, while I had got over my afflictions, she was slipping under the weather and her steadfast soul felt like to faint now and again.

I rated her when she revealed herself in a gloomy mood one evening.

"Here you've been in your native air a week, my love, and there's no rest in your eyes nor appetite in your mouth as yet," I said. "Why can't Beesworthy rise up to refresh you as it always does?"

She made a fearsome reply.

"Oh, Mother," she said. "I'm old—older than you—much older. You can't grow old, but I'm so old now that I'm just content to forgive life and accept death and welcome the utter and everlasting rest that death would mean. Haven't you ever felt like that? Just to forgive and forget."

"Lord love you, my lamb," I said. "What have I got to forgive? While there's life there's hope and I've heard you say how artists must never lose hope, else they are doomed. If I can hope on after my ups and downs, why not you with so many triumphs to remember? Even I can look back on my little triumphs and 'tis marvellous to see how much of your misfortunes come out in the wash."

"You say what you know," she told me. "You feel like that. For you time enriches the happiness of the past and space makes the distant hills purple and brings loveliness to your after-glow. You see things so, bless you."

"All double-Dutch to me, my love, but I pray, if there are discontents burdening your innocent heart, you won't let them bide there."

"I reproach myself for not having done better," she said.

"How many have done so well?" I asked her. "You had great gifts and you put them to good purpose. You have been the beacon star of my days, needless to say. I never thought of you as famous, but just as my own life's joy. But you've won the affection of thousands and, looking back, that ought to help you forward for many a long day yet."

"So it ought and so it shall," she promised. "It's vanity really—nothing but vanity, Mother. An artist ought never to grow old and never stop and never feel tired."

"You can't pretend to be a kitten all your life, of course," I granted, "either on the stage, or off it."

And then she explained how, full of enthusiasm and empty of sense, she had read a new drama and was bursting with excitement to perform the heroine, and how those going to produce the new play had been forced to break it to her she was too old for the part.

"You'd have thought," she said, "that I should have been the first to know it, but, up to then, I had never felt old or dreamed of such a malady so, when the news came to me, it was the most terrible and unexpected that a woman in my business could hear. For a little while I couldn't believe it and resented the suggestion, but I soon understood it was true and felt properly crushed to think what a fool I had been."

Soon her good sense won out and she explained how, not only your face and figure but your voice and your actions and everything else, takes on the mark of the years and how forty-five can't imitate eighteen however hard it tries.

"It isn't the fact really that has made me such an idiot for the moment," said Janice, "but the very horrid way the fact came to my notice. That is the difference between you and me, Mother. If I had your sense of humour, I should never have missed the state of affairs but, being the stupid owl I am, and having been spoiled by the public for so many years, when I read that lovely play, I lost my head and had to be reminded."

"Very tiresome for you, my precious," I said.

So that was how the truth came to the blessed creature, and, after she had told me, she cheered up and let down her food better and didn't talk any more about forgiving life and welcoming death and so on.

I took her on the water in Bob Mason's boat and daily she found herself in better fighting trim again. She threw her mind into my interests, too, as she always did, and saw some new birds that she had sent me for a birthday present and was wishful to know if my girl served my turn, for Mary Caunter was married to her fisherman now and I'd got a new handmaid with a nice feeling for poultry. Our fresh vicar, too, she had not met until this visit, though he'd been at Beesworthy quite a time now, and some of our oldest mistrusted him because he had risen from the working classes. But why not? He understood our manners and customs, and our difficulties a thousand times deeper than a man of family, who knew naught about us except that we had got souls. But there are many who like to feel their clergyman belongs to a higher class of creation than themselves, same as John Winter used to tell me how the rank and file felt happier under officers of better breeding than their own. Maybe the future warriors won't feel like that and, by all accounts, there was going to be a day before so very long when thousands of new soldiers would be called for to win another war.

That visit from my foster-child served her well also. She brightened and took a cheerfuller view of the situation; and another

little peaceful thing I remember too, because, the night before she was off and away, I chanced to dream a very beautiful dream which it gave me satisfaction to tell her about.

"All so real as real," I said. "There was I sitting in a nice boat and Tom Appleby was at the helm and Micah Widecombe forward and me betwixt them, handling mackerel lines, and the sun shining and all going as happy as a marriage bell."

"Your good angel sends you a dream like that sometimes," declared Janice. "I've had such dreams and wondered whether the pleasure was worth the pain when I woke up again. And it so happens, Mother, that in a little poetry book I found not long ago, there came the answer to my doubt. I'll copy it for you now this minute."

Up she got and fetched her book and wrote out the rhymes for me, so I can set them down in their place.

"Not much of a poem," she said, "but the idea seems all right."

"Read it out, my love," I begged, so she read the verses in her beautiful voice. It was called *The Ghosts*, but had nothing creepy about it.

"When Nature wills to plie her secret sleight
And summon shapes of those who used to be,
Shades from the past may glad a dreamer's night
With joy in their unreal reality.

For, while red letter days dawn rare in age,
A spectral happiness red letter nights
May haply conjure from Time's outworn page
And waken semblance of forgot delights.

In slumber rapt still side by side we rove
Through realms uncharted, where the quick meet dead,
And still we laugh, clasp youthful hands and love,
Forgetting the cæsura since one sped.

Few that have held dear trysts in kindly sleep
Amid the haunts of olden, golden years,
Yet when their eyes awoke again to weep
But found a rainbow glimmer in the tears."

"I believe that's true," said Janice. "What do you think, Mother?"

"It depends on the spectrums," I told her. "If they were such as you loved dearly, then, after you waken, you're sure to be sad for

a moment. I cried after that sea trip with Tom and Micah. But Nature is just as like to send a phantom you have got no use for. The sergeant marches in upon my dreams sometimes, because live people can push into your sleeping hours just as easy as dead ones; but so soon as I wake after a bout with John Winter, there's never a rainbow round about, nor yet a teardrop to catch such a thing."

She laughed her old, lovely laugh and I had to be content with dreaming about her for a long time after that, for she got work presently and became broken in to her age.

After all, if life's good enough, and your wits keep tolerable clear and the days are not too short, or the nights too long, then you can feel a pinch of thankfulness to carry on. If the aged don't put too heavy a tax on the middle-aged, then they can creep harmlessly along their twilight way. That was how I found myself at the allotted span; but, years later, I faced up to the most tremendous affairs that ever overtook England and came through them without a scratch or a broken bone.

CHAPTER X

NOT so many years after he left me the sergeant's words came true and Beesworthy wakened up one morning to hear Germany was at our throats good and grim. No great surprise, for such as followed the newspapers and listed to the wireless were assured long since that it must happen; but once the hawks were after the pigeons again, then we played our part—all Beesworthy put its best foot forward. We had heard what Germany was doing to Jews and women and children, so we well knew what she would do to us if she nosed her way into the British Isles, and we ordained to keep her out, cost what it might.

I couldn't plunge into the war without thinking on John Winter, and didn't doubt he would take the field once more. Fight he couldn't now, but he'd often said that if we fought again in his time, he would flock to the colours and be valuable as a teacher and trainer of the new armies. All manner of opinions were buzzing round about and some said this was the end of the world and others that it was the beginning of a new one. We had got a substitute clergyman, because the vicar, who had been a padre in the last war, went back to the Army again. A very old man took his place. The ancient gentleman lacked for teeth, but was full of good will, though he couldn't lift a voice to be heard half-way down the church. I lived in something of a dream myself, for it looked as if the far past was all back again with the men sped away once more and new wives throbbing for

their husbands and new mothers for their sons and new lovers for their sweethearts, just as in the war that was going to end war. All began to happen over again but there were new signs and wonders also because, with our best manhood gone to fight on land and sea, scores of elderly, retired men crept out of their holes and corners to build up the Home Guard. For, with the Germans flying in the air by thousands, like birds of prey, there was a new threat to this war lacking last time, because whole armies of the enemy might fall from the sky on our lone shores and hilltops and must be met and conquered and slain the moment they touched ground. It was a new sort of war and the Germans planned above all else to polish off the total number of human creatures on earth by millions in every land they conquered, so as to make more room for themselves afterwards. Which they did do and their hands were red with the blood of half Europe before the God-forgotten creatures came to their reckoning. For, though they could not land on England, we knew how to land where they were swarming and, after marvels done on the sea and in the air along with the Americans and the Russians, we got the enemy where we wanted him and Mr. Churchill, under God, pulled us through.

Many perished in England before peace was won, because the front threatened every roof-tree and every soul under it. Not a new-born baby's ear but must have heard the drone of the enemy over his cradle by night or day before the end. For me the challenge was no personal torment now. At my time of life you have long lost any sense of fear, because nothing much remains to fear about. I never feared for myself or my country but only for Janice, who went off to France with a lot of other brave actors and actresses to cheer up the troops between battles.

While strife lasted there were plenty of serious things for me to do and my own battle to keep food in the beaks of my birds. "So long as I'm spared," I told the poor fowls, "I'll scrape enough to hold your bodies and souls together; but you've got to grasp there's a war on, my dears, and are not the only mortals to run short."

You get clever under pressure and among other things that astonished me was the way war brought out cunning in many folk you had always thought too innocent to practise guile. And none surprised me more than myself. The less you know about domestic commands and printed regulations and punishments if you break them, the better for your peace of mind!

Plenty of us, who kept our nerve and faced the business year after year, were much puzzled to find our case harder afterwards than when it was going on, but that was explained by the need to keep

Europe alive after the peace, the world being cruel short of eatables and starvation following on slaughter in every stricken land.

It was just after the General Election when my nephew incited me to set down my life and I began to do so. The way the voting went disappointed Barnaby Blanchard a very great deal and me also, but Beesworthy stood firm for those who pulled us out of the war and I shall always say that England ought to have made Mr. Churchill a Duke and given him millions of good money before he was grown too old to care about it. You might almost say gratitude is a dead virtue in this country.

I resolved, before I set down my last words, to tell Janice what I had done and not keep it from her until after my end. I knew it was going to surprise and please her, and if you can gratify any dear person while you're alive, why wait till you are dead to do so? She is coming to be with me on my eighty-third birthday, so I shall wait until she has given me my birthday gift and then fetch out all my pile of writings and press them into her hands.

Somehow my last thought as I finish returns to the sergeant, who, when all is said, and whatever he was, still looks to be the most remarkable feature of the tale. Of course, when you adventure to relate your life, there is bound to be a terrible lot of you in it and sorry I felt when reading over the pages to find myself intruding so often; but you may say that John Winter still comes out top and if anybody could write his finish it would be a lot more interesting than mine. I have not given up all hope of hearing from him yet, and if I never do, there may be very good, orderly reasons why I should not. The sergeant was under fire like everybody else still in England, for he would never have been one to hide away in shelters when the bombs fell. Or he may have been a casualty and long since snatched away from the power to remember his promise. But that he would have kept it if he could, and may yet keep it if he can, I venture to believe. There was plenty of qualities in the man that only a wife can understand and nobody else ever gets a chance to.

As to how life looks to eyes eighty-three years old, I can only say they continue to be on the watch for betterment; while as for old age, the great thing is not to worry either yourself or other and busier people with it. Sit tight and keep out of the way as much as possible and, if you want to enjoy your fag end up to the finish, never waste an hour fretting because there is so little left.

"Rivers widen as they reach the sea," Janice said to me once, "and, while we have any wits left, they ought to widen likewise, even though old age shrinks up the rest of us."

THE END

ROMANCE

DOROTHY BUCK
Where the Road Ends

BARBARA CARTLAND
Against the Stream

DOROTHEA CONYERS
Dark

SIMON DARE
Give Fools Their Gold

SONIA DEANE
Rehearsal for Marriage

ANNE LORRAINE
Elusive Lady

EMMELINE MORRISON
Golden Autumn

MARGARET MORRISON
After Long Years

NETTA MUSKETT
Fire of Spring

KATHLYN RHODES
The Bright Company

DENISE ROBINS
All For You
Greater Than All

B. MONTAGU SCOTT
And, Which, the Knave?

MARJORIE STEWART
Buttered Toast

DOROTHY UPSON
Path to the Stars

Printed in Great Britain

THERE WAS AN OLD WOMAN

Eden Phillpotts, famous as the author of "The Farmer's Wife" and other delightful studies of the country life of Devon, gives us in this novel, a new picture of a Devon village, its life and people, as seen through the eyes of one of its oldest inhabitants. Her tale is the story of the village which is in fact many stories, of the love of young people, the drama and tragedy of minor conflicts, jealousies and hatreds which are inevitable where a number of people live together. It is, nevertheless, the story of a whole period too, for the country is the village writ large. This is a book of true realism in which townsfolk may capture the talk, scents and sounds of the country, and country folk may recognize and enjoy their own.

By the Same Author:

Novels:—

REDCLIFF
GEORGE WESTOVER
UP HILL, DOWN DALE
A CORNISH DROLL
THE GREY ROOM
THE JURY
THE RING FENCE
THE THREE MAIDENS
STORMBURY
"FOUND DROWNED"
BRED IN THE BONE
WITCH'S CAULDRON
A SHADOW PASSES
MR. DIGWEED AND MR. LUMB
THE OLDEST INHABITANT
PORTRAIT OF A GENTLEMAN
THE WIFE OF ELIAS
A VOICE FROM THE DARK
A DEED WITHOUT A NAME
PILGRIMS OF THE NIGHT
THE BOOK OF AVIS
FLOWER OF THE GODS
THE CHANGELING
THEY WERE SEVEN
A MUSEUM PIECE
THE DRUMS OF DOMBALI
QUARTET

Essays:—

A WEST COUNTRY SKETCH BOOK
ESSAYS IN LITTLE

Short Stories:—

IT HAPPENED LIKE THAT
THE TORCH
CHERRY GAMBOL
THEY COULD DO NO OTHER
PEACOCK HOUSE

THERE WAS AN OLD WOMAN

by

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers) LTD
London New York Melbourne Sydney Cape Town